Journey Amongst the Stars
by Lumendea

Summary

The Doctor and Rose Tyler continue their adventures in the TARDIS and even bring aboard a new or old friend, but they are drawing closer and closer to learning the truth about the words that have stalked Rose for years. Despite warning that Bad Wolf won't harm her, Rose can't help but worry about the circumstances that will set the words in motion. The mysteries of who Rose is going to become are finally unraveling. Partial rewrite of series 1 with an original episodes and other era rewrites.
It never failed to amaze Rose how adaptable and marvelous the TARDIS really was. After being awakened up by the lights in her room gradually turning on, she’d found fresh lilacs on her bedside table and clothes waiting in her small wardrobe. It went beyond the little things that the TARDIS did in her bedroom. According to the Doctor, the room they were currently in was new.

At first glance, there was nothing special about it. The walls were completely smooth and a soft ivory colour that wasn’t so bright as to hurt her eyes. The floor was smooth but had a slight bounce to it that made it comfortable enough to sit on. There was a soft background hum that was just enough to keep Rose from being frightened by the noise. Instead of having a direct source of light, the walls glowed just bright enough to make the light level comfortable.

“Is this the Zero Room?” Rose asked.

“No, how did you-? Oh, Tegan.” The Doctor shook his head. “No, the Zero Room is a null room that prevents any telepathic contact, even from people inside the room, and has properties to relax the minds inside of it. This is similar, but it only blocks outside contact and isn’t designed to disarm telepathic brains.” He gestured around. “This is a safe place where you and I can work on your telepathy.”
“Oh.” Rose nodded, but she’d miss the comfortable sofa in the library. “If you think it’s best.”

The Doctor smiled, and Rose wondered if he’d caught her thought. “It’s safer. The TARDIS has good defenses, but things have broken through in the past.” His unspoken desire to keep her safe came through loud and clear. “I learned in a room similar to this one. It won’t be necessary for long, you’ve got good shields, but this will give you a space to try more things.”

“What sort of things?” Rose asked cautiously. The Doctor hadn’t spoken of future possibilities in regards to her telepathy yet.

“Depends on what sort of talent you show and where your limits are.”

Rose huffed at the vague answer, but the Doctor just smiled and sat down. Rose sank down in front of him, crossing her legs and rolling her shoulders. She closed her eyes and began doing the basic exercises that her book had outlined and waited for the Doctor to do something. Slowly, her shield grew a touch stronger, and Rose tried not to smile. It got a bit easier each time.

For a long time, what seemed like hours, nothing happened. She opened her eyes to check on the Doctor. The Doctor was still sitting cross-legged in front of Rose, his posture straighter and more poised than she had ever seen it. While his face was calm and relaxed, but then Rose could feel his nervousness. It started buzzing along the edges of her mind, crashing against her weak shield like waves against a tidal wall in a storm. It wasn’t a scared nervousness, but more of a reigned in excitement. Rose was trying not to let her own nervousness distract her.

“You’re doing well,” the Doctor said. His voice rolled over her, and Rose quickly closed her eyes again. “Just stay focused.”

“When will I be able to keep shields up without focusing on it?”

“It’ll take some time,” the Doctor said. “You have to train yourself. It will slowly become more and more of a natural process. I have to focus in order to lower my defenses.”

A nervous giggle escaped Rose. She couldn’t see the Doctor, but she heard the shifting of his leather coat. Then he touched her knee and found her hand, rubbing his thumb over her skin. It was a grounding touch. He was with her in this.
“Is this a first?” Rose asked. “Training a companion in mental shields.”

“At this level, it is,” the Doctor agreed. “I don’t normally have any telepathic contact with companions since most are human.”

He pushed at the shield. Rose grit her teeth and tried to push back. It was difficult to summon more energy and focus. The shield buckled. Rose shivered, the Doctor’s mind slipped against hers. She had no words for the sensation, but the strange rush of sensations manifested as bright flashes of colour on the backs of her eyelids. Warm dark purple brushed against a stream of gold, sending small sparks flashing along both streams of colour. Happiness, relief, and contentment welled up in her chest. It disoriented her when the Doctor suddenly pulled back. Rose gasped for air, unsure of when she stopped breathing.

“Sorry,” the Doctor said quickly, guilt coloring his voice. His tone was low and tight.

“It’s okay.” Rose didn’t open her eyes, not wanting to lose the afterimages of the colors, but reached for his hand. “It didn’t hurt. It was different, but it felt… kind of nice.”

“Oh…” There was an odd hitch in his voice. Rose found his hand and squeezed it. “That’s… okay then. Still, the point is to help you learn to shield your mind.”

“I won’t always want to shield my mind though,” Rose said. “This could be useful.”

“You’re a long way from telepathic communication,” the Doctor said. “Best you’ll be able to manage right now is pushing feelings at someone.”

“Still, that could be useful.”

She watched the Doctor swallow. His eyes were a bit unfocused, and he looked… bereft. Then he shook himself, and the dazed expression vanished even though she didn’t let go of his hand. Dropping her eyes, Rose inhaled slowly and gave him a moment to recover. She just hoped that it had been pleasant for him rather than distressing. Rose was a bit surprised at the purple. She was certain that was the Doctor, but she’d expected blue like the TARDIS. Purple was a bit of a surprise.
The Doctor jumped to his feet, his body quivering and Rose was sure that he was going to bolt. Somehow, he kept himself in check long enough to extend a hand down to her. Smiling in gratitude, Rose let the Doctor help her to her feet.

“We need a trip,” he said. “Meet me in the console room. We’ll see where we end up.”

Rose nodded. Not that the Doctor would see it, he’d already bolted from the room. She sighed, trying not to let it offend her, but it did hurt a little bit. Just remembering the brief full contact made Rose shiver. Maybe it had felt even stronger to the Doctor. That made sense. It had probably been a long time since he’d had that kind of contact with another person. This time had been different than before.

“What do you think, Beautiful?” Rose asked. She laid her hand against the TARDIS wall. “Probably because I was more active rather than him just checking my mind. That probably has an impact.”

The TARDIS hummed around her, and Rose got the impression that the ship agreed and didn’t want her to worry about it. Rose sighed but nodded. She tried to be a patient woman, but she missed him sometimes; strange as it was to miss someone who was standing right beside you, but she did. Moments like this, knowing the good things about your future was hard when you couldn’t have them yet.

Rose shook her head and left the room, shutting the door firmly behind her. Out in the hallways, the TARDIS’ hum was louder and surrounded her. Relaxing a little, Rose headed to the loo to wash up a bit. Then after a quick detour to her room to grab her bag and a long red coat that the TARDIS had put in her wardrobe for her, she headed to join the Doctor.

“There you are,” the Doctor said. “We’ve landed.”

“Really? TARDIS must be in a good mood,” Rose teased. “See, I told you that you didn’t need the mallet.” The Doctor grumbled even as his cheeks reddened. Rose somehow managed not to laugh and walked over to join him. “So, where are we then?”

“Earth, the Black Forest, 1810.”

“What happens in 1810?” Rose asked.
“Napoleon marries Marie-Louise of Austria after annulling his marriage to Joséphine, King George III of the United Kingdom is recognized as insane, the First Oktoberfest in Bavaria, the Republic of West Florida declares independence from Spain and is then annexed by the United States—”


“I don’t know. Let’s go find out.”

“Should I change?” Rose asked. She looked down at her jeans and the red shirt under her open coat. “This isn’t exactly 1810 clothing.”

“No, but it’s probably a good idea for a walk in the woods.” The Doctor smiled, already heading for the door. “Besides, that’s what the TARDIS gave you, isn’t it?”

“True,” Rose agreed.

With that, they stepped outside. The first thing that hit Rose was the smell. The air was thick with the scent of pine, flora, and moist earth. To a city girl, it was overwhelming. As she breathed it in, Rose looked around with wide eyes. Tall trees surrounded them, some pine and the others all different kinds of deciduous. Decaying logs littered the forest floor alongside thick ferns, bushes, and craggy rocks. It was wild and reminded Rose of Sherwood Forest, wild and old.

“It’s beautiful,” she said.

“Sometimes you’re easy to impress,” the Doctor teased as he closed the TARDIS door.

“Don’t get cocky, Time Lord,” Rose said firmly.

“You won’t let me.”

Rose nodded and smiled at the statement. It was true. Moving to the Doctor’s right side, she took his hand as they started walking. There wasn’t much in the way of a true trail, but a narrow path had been trampled down by the animals. Looking over her shoulder, Rose tried to memorize the
location of the TARDIS but knew that it wouldn’t do any good. She’d have to rely on the Doctor’s extra senses to find the time machine here.

“Hopefully we’ll find a road soon,” the Doctor said. “You’ll enjoy a local village.”

“I’m sure I will,” Rose said. “1810, probably all sorts of interesting handcrafts for sale.”

The forest was very dense, and the thick canopy of leaves and pine made it rather dim for the daytime. Rose tried not to think about what it would look like after dark. She wondered if she was still jumpy from their scare at Christmas a few weeks back. The woods were beautiful, but a bit spooky too.

“Did you choose this or did the TARDIS?” Rose asked.

“Random,” the Doctor said. “Thought something unexpected would be fun.”

“Then I wonder what’s going on here.”

“There might not be anything going on,” the Doctor protested. “Not everywhere has trouble.”

“No,” Rose agreed. “But when the TARDIS picks a place to take us, there usually is. She does it on purpose.”

“Don’t give her too much credit,” the Doctor grumbled.

“Now you’re just being stubborn,” Rose scolded lightly. “You know its true.”

The Doctor’s ears reddened a touch when Rose nudged her shoulder against his arm, but he was smiling. The soft sounds of the forest surrounded them, and Rose found herself quickly adjusting. It was hard not to jump at every little rustle of bushes, but she was managing.

“Just background noises,” the Doctor said sometime later. “The city has them too.”
“I know.”

“You weren’t this jumpy in Sherwood.”

“We met chatterbox Robin Hood right away,” Rose reminded him. “There wasn’t much time spent in silence to listen to the forest.”

“Touché.” The Doctor squeezed her hand, and Rose told herself to just enjoy their walk.

The trees became less dense up ahead, and Rose spotted a small house. The house was different than Rose was expecting. It was a single story with a sloped roof that went all the way to the ground. Grass grew over the roof on a layer of soil that made it blend in. At first glance, Rose thought it was likely abandoned, but as they got closer, she noted a thin curl of smoke rising from the stone chimney at the back. On the far side was a small narrow path that was wider than the rest, but was a far cry from a real road.

“This is a bit out of the way,” the Doctor remarked. “Let’s see if anyone is home.”

As they walked towards the house, Rose studied it. Something seemed off, but she couldn’t put her finger on it. A strange smell began to fill her nostrils.

“Smell that?” the Doctor asked.

“What is it?”

“I think it’s gingerbread,” the Doctor answered. He stopped and stared at the house.

“Gingerbread,” Rose repeated. “Probably just someone baking. Maybe they can give us directions.”

“This is a bit far into the forest for a house.”
“Maybe not,” Rose said. “Could be a road right over the hill and a town in the valley.” Rose nodded towards the gently sloping hill beyond the house. “Besides, could be a woodsman.”

The Doctor gave her a look, and Rose shrugged. She was trying her best, but she had an odd feeling too. They walked toward the house again, and the Doctor knocked on the front door. Before Rose had time to call out to the owner, the whole house shimmered, and its appearance changed. The wood turned into smooth gingerbread and lines of frosting and sweets appeared along the door and the windows. The Doctor pulled her back from the house.

Then the house flickered again, and the appearance returned to normal. Rose blinked. Then she blinked again.

“Uh?”

“I saw it,” the Doctor said. There was a growl to his voice, and he lunged forward to bang on the door. There was a noise inside, and he tried to force the door. “This isn’t possible.”

Rose summoned her sword, but the door finally gave way and opened. The Doctor stormed inside with Rose right behind him. The interior was nothing strange. There was a cooking area, a table and chairs, shelves with dried goods and jars of food, and a doorway into the back room. No one was home, but a cauldron was bubbling over the fireplace. The Doctor glanced around the room and went to the doorway leading to the back. Rose looked back outside, checking that they were alone in the forest. When she touched the doorway, the appearance shifted once more to that of the gingerbread house for a moment.

“Doctor,” Rose called. “Anyone here?”

“No and thankfully no signs of children.” The Doctor said. He frowned as he returned to the main room and examined it. “This is strange.” He eyed the cauldron and looked inside. His shoulders relaxed. “Just boiling water.”

“This is weird,” Rose said. “Empty house that sort of looks like a gingerbread house.”

“No sign of a witch.” The Doctor ran his finger over the table. “Some dust build up. I’m not sure that this house is currently in use.”
“Except for the fire and boiling water,” Rose reminded him.

“Yes, except for that.”

Before Rose could take a closer look around, she heard voices outside and tensed. She and the Doctor exchanged worried looks before quickly moving to the door. Stepping outside, Rose blinked as she found a horse-drawn cart with two men sitting in it rolling across the not-quite-road. One of the men gestured to them, and the other pulled back on the reins to stop the horse.

“Ah, locals,” one of them said happily. He was a young man near Rose’s age. “Can you kindly direct us to the nearest village. We seem to have gotten turned around. We’re the Brothers Grimm.”

The Doctor almost laughed, but Rose could only gasp.
For a woman who had the words “Bad Wolf” following her for a good chunk of her life, Rose had never really thought about fairy tales or the Brothers Grimm all that much. She was suddenly feeling very much that had been a horrible oversight on her part. As a child, she hadn’t wanted her mother to tell her stories about princesses or true love; she’d been eager for any story about her dad that she could convince Jackie to tell.

Her exposure to fairy tales had mostly been through movies, and while she was far from an expert, Rose had heard many times that those animated classics were missing some key elements. In fact, she had a vague memory of a Cinderella live action film where there were talking doves, and the stepsisters cut off parts of their feet to try and fit the shoe. If memory served, Jackie had found her watching it and turned it off before the end.

She should have been worrying about that strange house that was sometimes a gingerbread house more than she was, but Rose had a bad feeling that the men waiting in the buggy were more important. The Doctor started walking toward them.

“I’m afraid we’re a bit lost as well,” the Doctor said loudly. “But maybe we can help each other!”

“Seems the only reasonable thing to do,” one of the men replied.

“The Grimm brothers,” the Doctor said softly to her. “Jakob is the elder, born in 1785 and Wilhelm was born in 1786. Being so close in age, they did almost everything together as children. They were born to a good family, but their father died in 1796 which impoverished the family. With the help of their aunt, they completed their educations, even graduating top of their classes despite not being favored for their position.”
Rose grimaced in sympathy. She knew how that one could go, and this era would have been even worse. There would have been a lot of limits on what their mother could do to support them. Given how close they were in age, Rose supposed it wasn’t a surprise that they were here together. Such a situation would have brought the two close together with only each other to depend on.

“You know them for the fairy tales, but their passion was the German language,” the Doctor said. “They’ve worked as librarians and wrote histories and grammar books.” He chuckled, almost fondly. “They started a German dictionary project that was too large for even them to complete.”

Rose wasn’t sure if that was funny or not. It was certainly a statement on just how much they believed in their work, and she nodded in understanding. The TARDIS library probably had a copy of that massive project if she ever got curious. She glanced at the horse drawing the cart. It didn’t look like anything special, and the wooden cart looked just to be wood. Were they aliens? She wished that she had better control over her telepathy.

Then the two men climbed down from their seat at the front of the cart. One of the patted the horse’s neck as they came around to greet them. She’d expected much older men than the pair that stood before her. They were both in their twenties, tall with dark hair and large slightly curved noses. Neither was attractive to Rose’s standards, but they had intelligent and kind faces with a disarming charm to them. They wore solid traveling clothing rather than the fancy clothes that Rose saw in pictures from this time. There was a strong resemblance between them, and Rose wasn’t sure which was which. The men were studying her and the Doctor with open curiosity.

“Good to meet you,” the Doctor said. “I’m the Doctor. Very glad that we ran into you.” He gestured at the house behind them. “Empty I’m afraid.”

“Oh that is a pity,” one of the men said. “We were on the main road only an hour ago. I can’t understand how we got so turned around.”

“What brings you out here?” the Doctor asked.

“We are traveling the region to collect stories,” the taller of the two said. He seemed a bit embarrassed but quickly explained. “Our goal is to record the local oral tradition stories as a means of celebrating the culture and language.”

“Ah, I see,” the Doctor said. “Nice to meet you then. I’m afraid that we got separated from our horses on the road. Tried to catch them, but got turned around.”
“My sympathies.” The man extended his hand. “I am Jakob Grimm,” he had slightly longer hair than his brother with a slight curl to it. For now, it was tied back in a rather messy ponytail. There was a small smudge of dirt on his face even as he nodded to her politely. “A pleasure to meet a fellow traveler.”

“My name is Rose Tyler,” Rose said. “It’s nice to meet you as well. Your work sounds amazing. You must come across very interesting stories.”

The second brother stepped forward. His hair was loose around his shoulders, and he somewhat reminded Rose of the Doctor’s eighth body. She quickly stamped down that comparison as Wilhelm took her hand. He brought it up to his lips and kissed it with a smile.

“Wilhelm Grimm,” he said. “Please forgive, Jakob,” Wilhelm said. “My brother is the deeper thinker between us.” His smile widened. “It is a great pleasure to meet someone so interested in our work.”

“I think it is wonderful,” Rose said sincerely. “It is so easy to lose traditional stories, I imagine. Someone forgets the tale or doesn’t pass it on, and it is gone forever.”

Wilhelm’s face lit up, and he nodded. “Precisely. These stories carry ideals of our ancestors. While some aren’t exactly… enjoyable to hear, there are lessons in them. Things that our forefathers put value in.” He straightened up, and Rose smiled at the passion. “Recording them ensures that they survive and is helping Jakob and I study the great German language.”

“Well,” the Doctor said loudly. “Given that all four of us managed to get lost, the best course of action seems to be to work together to find our way back to the main road.”

“Yes,” Jakob said. “That does seem to be a good thought.” He peered into the forest behind them. “I am sorry, but I can’t imagine that we’ll find your horses easily.”

“Don’t worry about them,” the Doctor said. “They’ll be fine.”

The brothers looked confused about the Doctor’s dismissal of valuable animals, but Rose used the opportunity to slip away to look in the cart. There was an old traveler’s chest, likely with clothing and supplies in the back. A small crate of apples and a few other random supplies rounded everything out. Rose noted a lump of rolled up fabric that looked like it might be a tent. Nothing
seemed out of place or dangerous.

“Climb in.”

Rose almost jumped and turned to find Wilhelm watching her with a smile. “You must be exhausted after wandering the woods on foot.” He glanced down at her feet. “At least you are wearing solid shoes.”

“I don’t want to impose.”

“The horse can manage the weight of you and your friend just fine,” Wilhelm assured her.

“Right, come on, Rose,” the Doctor said. He grinned at her and climbed into the back of the wagon. “No point lingering.”

He gave her a pointed look and then nodded towards the house. Rose nodded and climbed in, earning a smile from Wilhelm, who the Doctor glared a little at before seeming to catch himself. As she settled and the Brothers Grimm climbed back onto the bench, she turned around to look at the house. It was shifting again, but thankfully the brothers hadn’t noticed.

“Is it a hologram?” Rose whispered.

“I don’t think so,” the Doctor said. “I didn’t pick up any technology advanced enough for that.”

“Telepathic projection?”

“Did you feel anything like that?” He honestly sounded curious.

“No,” Rose whispered. The wood of the house seemed to be changing even if it was slow. “I didn’t.” She swallowed, and the cart started to move. “What if… I don’t know, whatever is causing this makes a witch to go with the house.” Rose felt ridiculous for even saying it.

“Then we need to hurry and find out what is causing this and if it’s one house or not,” the Doctor
said. Then he reached over to touch her hand before turning his attention to the brothers. “We’re lucky you came along.”

“We’re glad for some company,” Jakob said. “We’ve been having trouble navigating all afternoon.” He huffed and looked up at the trees. “I don’t know how we lost the road. At least we know we’re still in the Kingdom of Württemberg.”

Rose blinked and mounted the words slowly, very confused. She’d never heard of that nation, and she’d thought that the Black Forest was in Germany.

“This is before Germany is united,” the Doctor whispered. “It’s still a collection of small states sharing a language and culture.”

“Oh.” Rose blinked. She regretted once more her utter lack of memory when it came to history. “Right.”

“Germany isn’t a united country until 1871,” the Doctor said. “It’s younger than most people realize, especially compared to England.”

“Oh.” Rose blinked and looked back at the brothers. “I never realized that.”

“It’s a confederation of sorts now, but each country runs itself, and there are some intense rivalries. Austria is very powerful which is one of the reasons it doesn’t become part of Germany, politics with the Prussians. Their capital is Berlin, and their royal family will become the emperor when Germany is united.”

Rose wondered if that process had anything to do with this, but dismissed it quickly. She turned again so that she could look back at the house. Brightly colored candies had started to appear, and she hoped that neither brother turned to look behind them. Biting her lip, she looked at the Doctor and found him scanning the scenery with a stern expression. At least, they already knew that something was wrong.

In the distance, Rose heard something. She wasn’t sure what it was, but it sounded like a howl, and she tensed. No one else reacted, and for a moment, she wondered if it was a Bad Wolf sign, but they’d always been something that others could perceive even if they didn’t understand.
“Are wolves still an issue here?” Rose asked. “Like in the stories?”

“Wolves appear in the stories because they’re a natural enemy of farmers,” the Doctor said. “There’s still some wolves scattered in the area, but they’ve largely been killed off. Not unlike England, farmers systematically killed them.” Rose flinched at the words, unsure as to why they bothered her so much. “By your time they’re starting to come back into the area a little. Give it another century or so and Germany will actually have a few of their wolves, and eagles back.”

As if reacting to their conversation, a wolf howl echoed through the forest. The Grimms both stopped and looked around with a hint of nervousness. Rose looked into the trees around them but saw nothing that looked dangerous. None the less, the brothers urged the horse to go a bit faster.

“We best get a move on,” Wilhelm said. “We don’t want to be out after dark if we don’t have to.” Then he nodded to Rose, “And you best stay on the path.”

The Doctor snorted, but it took Rose a moment. Then she looked down at herself and groaned. She was dressed in a red shirt and a long red coat that even had a hood. The TARDIS had dressed her up as Red Riding Hood. Given the Bad Wolf references sure to follow, Rose wasn’t sure how worried she should be.

“Any thoughts on a town?” Wilhelm asked. “I was hoping that the house was an indication, but this old road doesn’t seem to be going anywhere.”

“I’m not sure either,” the Doctor said. “Sorry, but we got very turned around.”

“This path is clear,” Jakob said. “It has to go somewhere.”

“It’s not that clear. It’s half overgrown,” Wilhelm corrected. He was starting to sound very worried.

The cart rolled around a curve in the hill, and they all gasped. Three women were sitting together on small stools around a spinning wheel, working at different stages with what looked like raw material to make thread a few feet ahead. One had a huge foot and was using it on what looked like a pedal. Another had a huge thumb and was manipulating a roundish wooden device that had rough material wrapped around it that she kept dropping to stretch the material out. The third had massively oversized lips. None of them seemed to notice their cart at all. Rose sat up on her knees to look at the women.
“That’s remarkable,” Wilhelm said. “Those women—they look just like the three old maids form that story we just heard!”

“It’s a coincidence,” Jakob said. “But what are they doing out in the forest to spin? Why bring a spinning wheel out here?”

“Excuse me,” Wilhelm called out. “Can you direct us to the nearest village? We’ve gotten a bit lost.”

The women didn’t look up from their work, but the third one who was licking at the edge of a thread raised her left hand and pointed ahead.

“Keep going straight,” she ordered. Then she went back to work.

“Ah… I see, thank you,” Wilhelm said.

The Doctor was staring at the women, a strange expression on his face that Rose didn’t like. It was curious and worried all at once. She shifted closer to him but tried not to stare at them. What had the Brother’s Grimm meant about them being from a story? She’d never heard such a story.

“What story were you talking about?” Rose asked softly as they rolled past the women.

“It’s a simple tale,” Jakob answered. “It’s one of the tales that we’ve collected for our book. Once there was a beautiful—but-lazy girl who would not spin. Her mother beats her for her laziness, but one day the Queen passed by and asked the reason for the punishment. Ashamed to admit that her daughter is lazy, the woman replies that the girl spins so much that her mother cannot afford to buy enough flax to keep her occupied. The Queen is impressed by the girl’s industry and takes the girl with her to the castle. Once there, the girl is put in a room full of flax and is given an offer: if she spins it all within three days, she’ll marry the queen’s oldest son and become the next queen. But when the queen returns two days later, the girl has done no spinning. The girl pleads that homesickness has kept her from spinning, but she knows that she cannot use that excuse again. Three women appear in the room that night. One has a grotesquely swollen foot; the second, an overgrown thumb; the third, a pendulous lip.” Jakob gestured vaguely behind them and turned slightly, still looking nervous. “They offer to spin all the flax for the girl if she will invite them to her wedding, introduce them as her aunts, and seat them at the high table. She agrees, and they commence and complete the spinning. In the morning the queen is happy to see all the spinning done and the wedding is quickly planned. As promised, the girl invites her aunts. When they appear, the king asks how they came to have such deformities, and the three explain that they come from their years of spinning. The king forbids his beautiful daughter-in-law to spin again.”
Rose wanted to laugh at the ending but only nodded. The Doctor said nothing as they kept following the path forward.

“That is strange,” Rose said softly. “How old is the story? Maybe they inspired it.”

Wilhelm chuckled at the idea, but then a loud gasp escaped him. His brother made a similar sound of shock mere moments later. The Doctor scrambled to the front of the cart to look ahead. Rose clung to the side and leaned out. There, ahead of them, was the same house from before, but now it was a perfect little gingerbread house complete with a sweet smell wafting towards them.
Journey Amongst the Stars

By Lumendea

Chapter Three: Mirror on the Wall: The Gingerbread House

Disclaimer: I do not own Doctor Who or any of the spinoff material and I gain no income off of this story, just the satisfaction of playing with the characters.

The Grimms brought the wagon to a sudden stop, and they all just stared at the house. Smells of sweets and gingerbread filled Rose’s noise, bringing back vague memories of holidays when her granddad was still alive. She blinked and pushed the memories aside quickly and looked at the Doctor. He was not enthralled, but rather was studying the house intently.

“It’s not possible,” Jakob said. He sounded truly shaken, and Rose put a hand on his shoulder. “That… that can’t be the same house.”

“But the spinners and now this,” Wilhelm gasped. “What in Heaven’s name is going on?”

“Stay calm,” the Doctor said. “We don’t know what’s going on just yet.”

There wasn’t even a chance to fully process that before Rose heard a laugh. It was soft and high pitched, instantly making her look around with worry. Then she found a small figure hurrying towards the house. The little boy had ginger hair. That was the first detail that Rose noticed. Then he turned to look over his shoulder and Rose almost slipped in her shock. It was Adam. A young Adam with his original red hair and bright, happy eyes. He grinned at her and then looked down at the bundle he was carrying. A small hand reached out toward Adam. She only had a glimpse of the infant’s face, but it was so familiar. It was like a punch to Rose’s gut. Astra, she knew that it was Astra.

She started scrambling out of the wagon, not waiting for anyone to say anything more. The Grimms made shocked sounds of worry. Adam didn’t let go of Astra and rushed into the house, laughing happily. There was a figure in the doorway, and Rose bolted forward.
“Adam!” she screamed. “Astra! No, come back! It’s not safe!”

“Rose!”

She didn’t wait for him. Inside her head was a frantic screaming for Adam and Astra. They were in danger! Rose wasn’t a fairy tale expert, but she knew how the story with the two children in the gingerbread house went. She could see the figure in the doorway now. Her first thought was a witch.

The witch was a short, stout woman with messy dark gray hair and wrinkled skin with an odd greenish tint to it. She wasn’t wearing a pointed hat, but Rose was sure of what she was supposed to be at once. She heard the others shouting behind her, but didn’t stop. The children were inside; she couldn’t stop. The witch slammed the door shut, but Rose didn’t give her any time to lock or secure it. She threw all of her weight forward. Pain radiated down her side, but the biscuit door gave way, splintering when Rose slammed her shoulder against it for a second time.

Stumbling inside, Rose found the witch by the fire, putting more logs on underneath the cauldron. She spun around and hissed at Rose. The children were seated at the table with Adam eating a plate full of sweets and the baby drinking something from a small cup. They looked over at her in surprise.

Then the Doctor was behind her, touching her shoulder before speaking. “Rose, I’m not sure that this is real.”

“Who are you?” the witch demanded. “Get out of my house!”

Rose ignored her and took the plate from Adam who scowled at her. The reaction hurt. Why wasn’t he happy to see her? He was always happy to see her. The witch snarled at her.

“Get out of my house! I invited the children, not you!”

“I think we best be getting them back to their parents,” the Doctor said. He sounded calm and collected, the opposite of how Rose felt. Gently, he took hold of her hand. “Children don’t belong in woods.”
“Doctor!” one of the Grimms called from the door in warning.

Rose saw the witch moving. She grabbed a heavy looking iron implement by the fireplace. Rose might have known the name for it, but right now, she didn’t care. With a snarl, the witch swung it at her. Rose dodged but noted that the children weren’t reacting. Adam had gotten his plate of sweets back and was eating again. His eyes were dull and lifeless more like a doll than her intelligence grandson.

Wilhelm dashed forward, grabbing the broom by the door and striking the woman hard across the chest. She hissed, and her whole face changed, the green tint darkening and making her flesh appear decayed. Her eyes bulged out of her face, and her lips pulled back to reveal a row of unnaturally sharp teeth. Rose didn’t even have a chance to react before Wilhelm hit her again. Jakob ran past them and opened the door of the large stone oven. Rose didn’t move as the brothers shoved the witch into the oven. It wasn’t large enough for all of her to go in, but a burning smell instantly filled the house.

Twin looks of horror and shock at their actions took over the brothers. Rose lurched forward, her stomach threatening to turn and she reached to Adam. But just as she reached them, they both vanished. There was no one else in the house now. Releasing a shaky breath, Rose leaned against the table. A moment later, the Doctor was beside her and holding her shoulder. He didn’t say anything and gently guided her out of the house. The Brothers Grimm stumbled out behind them, taking gibberish to each other and frantically gesturing at the strange house.

It wasn’t them. It had never been them. Her daughter and grandson were safe in their own places in the timeline. They hadn’t been in danger from an evil witch in the Black Forest. She closed her eyes and focused on the beat of her heart to calm down. The terror had been real. They’d looked so real.

“This isn’t possible,” Jakob said. Rose opened her eyes to look at him. “It can’t be happening.” He lightly kicked the wooden side of the house. “I saw it and yet… this has to be a trick. Someone is setting up this horrible joke in the forest.”

“Why would anyone go to the trouble?” Wilhelm asked his brother. “And you saw the house change!”

“Something is toying with us,” the Doctor said. “We need to stay calm and try to remember that what we see isn’t real.”

“This house seems real,” Jakob said.
But even as he said that the house was changing. Cobwebs were appearing in the corner. The fire went out, and the cauldron vanished. Rose looked down at the remains of the door which were more wood. The brothers made startled sounds, and Rose felt very sorry for them.

“Something used it as a base,” the Doctor said. “Seems abandoned.”

“Something?” Wilhelm repeated. “What sort of something?” He was pale and quivering slightly. “Who are you people? This can’t be real.”

“Calm down,” the Doctor ordered. “I’m not sure what is causing this either, but it seems to have something to do with you two.”

“With us?” Jakob gasped. Then his face reddened, and he puffed up. “Surely you aren’t accusing-”

“Things are appearing from your stories,” the Doctor said.

“We are librarians,” Wilhelm insisted. “These aren’t our stories. We are just recording them!” The man was trying to collect himself but was in shock. It was familiar. Rose remembered Charles Dickens being confused and in denial. “They aren’t real. There is no such thing as witches. This has to be some kind of trick.”

“That’s possible,” the Doctor agreed. His calm was reassuring Rose, and she stayed close to him. “Someone has got us going in circles and is using the stories to scare us. Maybe they want to kill us, or maybe they want something else.”

“What could they possibly want?” Jakob asked. He narrowed his eyes at them. “Who are you? This trouble started when we met you!”

“No, it didn’t,” Rose said. “You got lost, remember? You never left the road but somehow got lost. Whatever- whoever is behind this, got to you first.” The brothers both looked ill at the very idea. Pity for them swirled in her chest, and Rose gave them a weak smile. “It’s scary, I know, but we need to stick together. Those children looked like kids I know and care about so other things may target you.”
“Within the context of the stories?” Wilhelm shook his head and chuckled nervously. “This is madness. Pure madness. I must be dreaming.”

“Believe what you want,” the Doctor said. “But I want to help. This is bad enough with us, but if someone else wanders in then, it will only get worse. I’d rather that the no real children find this house and a witch inside. Whatever is causing this needs to be stopped.”

His words seemed to reach the Brothers Grimm. Their expressions shifted, and they both nodded. They still seemed uncertain, but at least the Doctor had given them something to focus on. “Good, now, we need to try and sort out how large an area we’re dealing with. You two stay together unless you’re with Rose or me.”

“If I may,” Jakob interrupted. “The lady should be very careful. She’s in red like the Red hooded girl, and we’ve all lost the path. She already fits into another story.”

“I’ve already thought of that,” Rose admitted. “Don’t worry; I won’t let any wolves lure me away.” She tried to keep her tone light, but none of the men seemed reassured.

“That’s not…” Jakob coughed lightly. “There are other versions and connotations to the story. I’d suggest you be mindful of any male that uh tries…” he trailed off, turning red.

“Oh.” Rose nodded in understanding, putting the man out of his misery. “Don’t worry on that front either. I’m not an easy girl to distract. Besides, I’m not afraid of the Big Bad Wolf.”

She almost broke into giggles, but the others wouldn’t understand. The Doctor frowned a little, his blue eyes thoughtful and distant, but he said nothing on the matter. The Brothers shifted back, returning to their cart and pulling out a book that they started flipping through. Rose hoped that it was a record of what else they could expect. Then she sighed and looked to the Doctor.

“Why do you think this is happening now?” Rose asked.

“Pardon?”

“Fairy tales are coming to life just as the Brothers Grimm are in the area,” Rose explained. “Is it being caused by something that knows the fairy tales because it’s from this area or is it drawing the stories from them directly?”
The Doctor froze and then very slowly looked back at her. “I mean, they did say that they’d only just heard the story about the three spinners,” Rose added. “So, it’s not like it’s been published. I know the stories because I grew up with them, but out here, in theory, those stores are scattered. How is whatever is causing this getting them?”

“Oh.”

“Oh? What’s oh?”

The Doctor grabbed her hand and pulled Rose a bit closer to him. There was a soft brush against her shields, a gentle nudge, but it still made Rose tense. It was still so different, so alien, and she swallowed nervously even as she recognized it was the Doctor.

“Your shields are down,” he said softly. “You need to keep them up, Rose. It’s vital that you keep them up.”

“Doctor?”

He leaned closer and kissed her cheek before whispering very softly. “Eternal.”

The word made Rose grimace, but he was right, it fit. She’d heard Tegan’s story about the Eternals creating things from human minds. It would be simple enough for them to pull elements of the stories out of the heads of the Brothers Grimm or the forms of her child and grandchild from her, but to what end?

“We’re stuck here,” Rose said softly. “Is it just a trap or something more?”

“I don’t know. Could be a diversion too.”

“What are you two talking about?” Wilhelm called over. He and his brother were walking over. “Have you any ideas?” The man’s eyes were wide with fear and disbelief. “This is some figment of our imaginations!”
“Yes,” Jakob agreed. “We ate something during our last stop.”

“Sorry, but no,” the Doctor said firmly. “I hate to tell you this, but these things are all real, and something is shifting space just enough to keep us from leaving the area.” The Doctor looked up into the sky. “Can’t say for sure, but I doubt we’ve left the same five square miles since we met.”

“You can’t-” Yet Wilhelm was looking around nervously. “This is madness.”

“Yes, it is,” the Doctor said. “But we can get out of this.” Rose nodded and started to relax a little while the Doctor watched her. “This should go without saying,” the Doctor added, “but don’t eat any apples or touch any spindles.”

“Ah, Doctor, are you saying that I’m the fairest of them all?” Rose asked. The Doctor reddened at her tongue touched smile. “I won’t,” Rose promised. “You be careful too. There’s a lot of things to unleash in fairy tales if you aren’t careful. I’m sure there’s plenty of bad things that happen to men too in those stories.”

The Doctor studied her for a moment. Then he wrapped an arm around her and pulled Rose into a gentle warm hug. “You okay? Who were those kids to you?”

“Just some kids,” Rose whispered. She couldn’t help but shiver at the memory. The Eternal must have plucked it out of her head. She wasn’t a strong enough telepath to keep it out. “Kids I know or knew. They aren’t that age anymore. It just startled me.”

“Kids are always hard,” the Doctor agreed. “But it wasn’t them.” He pulled back enough to look at Rose. “Try to keep that in mind, Rose. These things are projections of the Eternals will. They feel real, but they aren’t what they seem. They can manipulate matter.”

“Yeah.” Rose nodded and swallowed the lump in her throat. “I know. I do know that just hard to remember that.”

“And that’s probably what this Eternal is hoping for. To throw us off enough that we make a mistake,” the Doctor said. “We need to stay together and be careful.”

“How do we beat an Eternal?” Rose asked. “I doubt it’s going to let me get close with my sword.”
“That’s more complicated,” the Doctor admitted. He looked around. “If we can get back to the TARDIS, I can create something that will make the Eternal a bit less Eternal.”

“A bit less Eternal?”

“I once made a whole group mortal,” the Doctor admitted. “They had just killed a planet for fun. I was angry.”

“Fair enough.” Rose inhaled and nodded. “Okay, back to the TARDIS then.” Then she turned around and looked at the different trees. “Which way?”

The Doctor hesitated, and Rose’s stomach dropped. “I… I’m having trouble sensing her.”

“That’s not good,” Rose whispered. “So we have to go looking for the TARDIS in fairy tale land and who knows what being created to hurt us.”

The Doctor took her hand and squeezed it. “We’ll get out of this. Just be smart no matter what you come across.”

Rose nodded. She wasn’t completely confident, but he was right. They couldn’t just stay here. They walked over to join the Brothers Grimm.

“Doctor, Rose,” Jakob greeted. He was looking at an old-fashioned faded map. “We’re trying to find where we are… I can’t find the road anywhere.”

“I doubt you will,” the Doctor said. “We’re in some kind of trap. Something powerful is bringing the local stories to life. They probably mean us harm. The road won’t help us. Grab what you can carry, and we start searching off the road.”

“Something powerful?” Wilhelm repeated. “You can’t be serious. Bringing the stories to life, that’s ridiculous.”
“Do you have another explanation?” The Doctor asked sharply. “And you know the stories well enough to know that there are worse things to throw at us then a gingerbread house.” Then he shook his head and shrugged. “You two can keep around in circles, but Rose and I are going to see if we can find a way out.” He started to turn away.

“Wait! She’s dressed in red,” Jakob said. “She shouldn’t leave the path.”

“We can’t get anywhere on the path,” Rose reminded him. “I’ll be fine.”

The brothers looked at each other nervously. Exhaustion was already settling into their eyes, and Rose felt very sorry for them. This was far more than they’d signed up for when they came into the Black Forest to record local stories. Something seemed to pass between them because Jakob sighed and went around to the back of the wagon. They each pulled out satchels and slung them over their shoulders.

“I hope you’re wrong, Doctor,” Jakob said. “I can’t imagine that this is someone intention.”

“You just killed a witch by shoving her in an oven,” the Doctor said. “Whether you want to believe it or not, you know that something isn’t right here.”

The Brothers Grimm flinched at the mention of the witch. Rose gave them soft reassuring smiles. Then she followed the Doctor as he turned around. Together, their small group began to walk off the path vaguely in the direction that Rose thought they’d come from the TARDIS the first time they’d found the house.
Rose didn’t trust the terrain as they walked. She didn’t know if vines came alive in most fairy tales, but she was sure that she’d seen that in movies. There wasn’t enough of a road for the cart, and she’d seen the clear hesitation in leaving it behind. Still, they’d come with her and the Doctor to her surprise.

“I still don’t understand,” Wilhelm said. “What is causing this?”

Rose and the Doctor exchanged a look. How did they explain this?

“Something powerful is using your stories for inspiration,” the Doctor said.

“That’s…” Jakob shook his head, but he didn’t argue. “And we cannot leave the area.” He shook his head. “I was minding the road. I’m sure that it didn’t turn.”

“It probably didn’t,” the Doctor agreed.

“Then how?” Wilhelm demanded. “That’s not possible!”

“This creature… it can alter the world around you. It’s not from this world, and I don’t know what it wants here. It’s kind often just like to toy with humans. They find it entertaining.”
“You can’t mean to say that magic is real?” Jakob gasped. “That- that the gods of old are real?”

“This isn’t magic,” the Doctor promised. “It’s hard to explain, but no curses are waiting out here. If we can find my TARDIS, then we can fight back.”

“Your what?”

“My TARDIS. It’s a blue box. Keep an eye out for it.”

“So you weren’t out here on a horse,” Jakob said. He was frowning and eyeing the Doctor suspiciously.

Rose spotted something ahead of them. A tall, dark shape through the trees. Glancing back at the men, she gestured for them to be quiet and then pointed ahead. Thankfully, even the Brothers Grimm fell silent. They crept forward slowly, each sound seeming exaggerated in the still forest. As they came closer, Rose could see that it was a stone tower.

The tower was made of dark stone and stood only about three stories tall. Around it, tall trees largely kept it hidden, but Rose was certain that it was a new addition to the forest. There was one window high and no doorway. It was silent, and there was no light coming from the upper window. A small curtain fluttering in the breeze was just visible, but there was no sign of any other movement.

“Doctor? How does the original Rapunzel end?”

“Rapunzel becomes pregnant from the prince and is banished into the wilderness by Gothel,” the Doctor answered. “Then Gothel traps the prince and blinds him. The pair finds each other in the wild after Rapunzel gives birth. Her tears heal his eyes, and they survive.”

“That’s… not great,” Rose said. “But not terrible.”

“So what danger lies here?” Jakob asked. “If we are indeed threatened by the tales?”

“Maybe someone waiting to kill you as soon as you reach the top,” the Doctor said.
“That’s a pleasant thought,” Rose said. “Maybe this isn’t Rapunzel’s tower. Maybe it’s something else.”

“The Eternal does need to be present physically,” the Doctor agreed. He was frowning up at the window. “Not sure we should risk it.”

“It might be a local watchtower,” Jakob suggested. His voice wavered slightly. “Maybe it was already here.”

Rose stepped away from the others and circled the base of the tower. There were no doors on the far side hidden away and no sign of even a secret entrance. Reaching out, Rose pressed her hand against the stone. It was rough with hints of wear from the weather, real and solid. If there had been a door, she would have considered Jakob’s suggestion. Looking up, she found Wilhelm circling the tower and touching it as well.

“I am unsure if this is a miracle or a nightmare,” he admitted. “These stories… they are our culture, part of the fabric of the society that we raise our children in, and yet now I sense foul intention within them.”

“I’m sorry,” Rose offered softly. “For what it is worth, I’m sure that the stories will be appreciated properly in the future.” At least most of them, Rose inwardly added. Others she’d never heard of.

“Who are you?” Wilhelm asked. He was studying her as if she was a rare curiosity. “You and your companion? These strange happenings do not frighten you.”

A howl made them all stop, and Rose’s answer was lost. Rose’s chest tightened, and her heart beat fast. The warning from the Brothers Grimm rang in her head, but she didn’t think that they would help now. Then again, there was a bad wolf in the Three Little Pigs too, wasn’t there? Probably others too given that Germany was a farming land. In old times surely wolves were one of the biggest fears. Another howl made Rose step away from the tower and scan the trees.

“Oh dear,” Wilhelm breathed.

Something moved in the trees, but it was too tall to be a wolf. Rose’s heart jumped; it was too tall unless it was a humanoid wolf-like in some portrayals. But it wasn’t a wolf that stepped out of the trees. The figure was humanoid with a pale, almost blue face that looked like a painted doll. Thick
golden curls surrounded the face, and it wore a long fancy gown. But horrifyingly, it had no hand. There were bloody stubs at the ends of its arms, but even worse was the ring of hands surrounding its head like a twisted halo. There were over a dozen of them, twitching and flexing their fingers. The figure walked slowly towards them, its face twisting and distorting slightly.

“This can’t be from a fairy tale,” Rose gasped. She took a step back.

“It’s the handless girl,” Jakob whispered. “But- but it isn’t like this! Not at all like this!”

“Just stay calm,” the Doctor said. “The Eternal is twisting your stories now to make them more frightening and potentially more dangerous.”

“Eternal?” Jakob gasped, but he didn’t finish his questions. “Uh, hello there, my lady. May we assist you?”

The figure stopped, and for a brief moment, Rose wondered if this might not be as horrible as it seemed. But then the figure opened its mouth. A sheer noise came out, and the hands all stopped moving. Before anyone could move, the hands left the halo and rushed towards them. One struck the Doctor in the chest, knocking him back several feet. Screams erupted from the Brothers Grimm. Hands flew through the air at them, and the brothers ran.

Shifting her wrist, Rose summoned her sword and brought it up in front of her. Three hands raced towards her. She swung at the closest, slicing through it. The flesh fell apart, and Rose’s stomach turned at the sight of the blood. A scream bubbled up in her own throat, but she kept it in. More hands attacked her, and she swung, but one caught her in the back, making her stumble. She glanced back at the figure; it was drawing nearer and more hands were appearing around it. Rose tried to find the Doctor, but she couldn’t see him close by. The Brothers Grimm were done.

In the distance, Rose thought she heard a familiar series of swear words, and as she turned to look, a pair of hands grabbed the back of her coat and hoisted her up. Rose swung the sword up blindly, trying to catch them, but failed. Her feet were pulled off the ground, and Rose struggled even more. She could feel the coat slipping and started trying to wiggle out of it, but the hands started moving, carrying her away from the tower. She let go of her sword and twisted her shoulder, trying to get free.

Trees rushed past her and Rose gasped several times as she swung too close to a thick trunk. Finally, she slipped free of her red coat and fell to the ground. Her foot caught a root, and she hissed in pain but scrambled to her feet. The hands instantly realized that they’d lost their prisoner. Her coat fell to the ground a few feet away, and they swung back to face her. Rose summoned her
sword back and brought it up just as another howl ripped through the forest air. A massive wolf appeared in the corner of Rose’s right eye. Its mixed white and grey fur almost shimmered in the low sunlight, and it snarled.

“Great,” Rose whispered. She adjusted her stance, glancing between the wolf and the hands.

Before she could choose the first target, something moved to her left. Rose risked a look, and her stomach tightened. The creepy handless creature was walking towards her. There were more hands around its head now, once more forming the odd halo appearance. It didn’t seem bothered by the wolf, and the dull eyes were focused on her.

The wolf lunged past Rose, snarling and blocking her view for a moment. The hand monster opened its mouth, but the massive wolf struck it head-on. They both tumbled to the ground, the wolf tearing wildly at the creature’s chest. Rose was frozen, but only for a moment. Running forward, she looked around as the hands began zooming back towards the monster and the wolf. She sliced through the first two with rapid swings and shifted to block the third. She ignored the flesh as the hands fell open and reminded herself that this was just a creation of an Eternal. It wasn’t a truly living thing, more like a solid illusion. She still felt sick.

Then the creature stopped moving, and the last of the hands dropped out of the air. Before Rose could start panicking about a body in the middle of the forest, it and all the hands began to dissolve. It fizzled, but only for a moment before it seemed to just collapse into a mound of dirt. Then the wolf moved forward and sniffed at the pile. The light forest breeze began to carry away the specks of dirt. Soon there would be nothing left. Rose wondered if that was how it always worked for Eternal’s creations or something here was different.

The large wolf turned towards her, golden eye meeting hers and glinting in the light. Rose stopped and watched the creature move. It just stared at her, making no move to attack. Then before she could say or do anything, the wolf turned around and rushed into the trees. In the shadows of the trees, it quickly vanished from view leaving Rose alone and confused.


A nervous laugh tried to build up in her chest, but she suppressed it. There were other things to worry about. The Eternal was twisting the fairy tales now, and she couldn’t help but be very worried about that. Thankfully, the hands hadn’t taken her far, and Rose pulled back on her coat as the chill tried to settle into her bones. Double checking her direction, Rose started to run back towards the tower, keeping her eyes and ears open for any sound of the others.
“Doctor!” she shouted. “Grimms? Can anyone hear me?” The forest was still and silent in response to her question. “Can’t be far,” Rose said to herself. “We’re trapped after all.”

“Rose?” She knew that voice and turned as another figure came running up.

“Doctor!” Rose sighed in relief and moved forward. He opened his arms and accepted the hug with a smile. “You alright?” Rose asked. Pulling back a bit, she checked him over for injuries. There was some slight bruising around his neck that made her frown. “What happened?”

“I’m fine. Managed to get free of those hands. Then they vanished not long after. Was that you?”

“Uh… sort of, I got some help from local wildlife.”

“What?”

“A wolf helped me,” Rose answered. She shrugged. “I don’t get it either.”

“Bit different than the Bad Wolf we were expecting,” the Doctor said. Then he frowned a little. “Then again… maybe not.” Then he shook his head. “Come on; we have to find the TARDIS and fast!”

“What about the brothers?” Rose asked. She gestured around. “They’re out here too.”

“I know, but the Eternal is going to keep giving us the runaround. If it is using their minds and knowledge as the source of these ideas, then it can’t hurt them.” He sounded confident and met her gaze. “We’ll help them best by stopping that Eternal.”

“Okay,” Rose agreed. “Doctor, I think it’s in the tower.” The attack happened when we found the tower. “It seems… I-”

“I agreed.” The Doctor cupped her cheek gently. “There’s a telepathic force there. I didn’t feel it at first. It was probably blocking us, but once the attack started, it had to reach out more.” He took her hand gently. “Come on, Rose. Let’s find the TARDIS and put a stop to this bad story.”
Clinging to the trunk of the tree, Jakob tried not to think about the branches creaking below him. They had to hold even if only a little longer. Below him, stood three wolves all with glowing gold eyes that made him shiver. They were just looking up at him, not growling or snarling. He swallowed. His fear was beginning to be replaced with curiosity. These wolves were behaving oddly, but after that horrible handless creature that was an insult to the story, he wasn’t sure what these creatures might be capable of.

“They don’t seem to be attacking,” Wilhelm said.

He looked over to a nearby tree where Wilhelm was waiting. His brother seemed to have picked the superior tree to climb as the branches formed an empty space for him to sit. He looked much more comfortable and was actually learning out to study the wolves. Two more were under his tree.

“They seem to be waiting for something,” Wilhelm added. Then he looked out into the forest. “I can see the tower, barely, but I can see it.”

Jakob couldn’t see the tower from his position. The thick green leaves were too thick around him. “Do you see the others?”

“No, and no sign of those hands. Maybe it was killed, and that’s why the hands vanished.”

“Killed by whom?” Jakob muttered. “Our companions didn’t strike me as dangerous. Odd but not dangerous.”

“I disagreed, my brother. There was something odd about them both. They are enshrouded in secrets.”

“Yes, but I don’t think they mean us harm.” Glancing down at the wolves, Jakob swallowed nervously. “Either try to eat us or move off. This doesn’t seem like normal behavior.”
“Maybe they are trying to starve us out. I fear I don’t know much about the hunting patterns of wolves.” Wilhelm chuckled. “It almost seems like they are trying to keep us here. Making sure that we can’t get into any trouble.”

Jakob snorted and adjusted his grip on the trunk. He looked up, trying to see if there was a better position he could shift himself into. There wasn’t, and he sighed. Then he looked down at the wolves. They were still just watching them, making no sounds. He had to admit that while crazy, his brother’s thought didn’t seem completely unreasonable.

....................

The TARDIS was right ahead of them, but that made Rose stop in suspicion. The Doctor tried to keep walking, but Rose grabbed his arm tightly to hold him still. Nothing moved. She could feel the soft hum of the TARDIS in her mind and was certain that this was the real TARDIS.

“This has trap written all over it,” Rose whispered. A breeze blew across her face. The forest was silent. “We found it a bit easily, don’t you think.”

“Maybe, but the Eternal might be busy with something else.” He smiled softly at her, but Rose could see the worry in his eyes. “We have to try.”

Nodding, Rose released the Doctor’s arm, and he took a step forward. Beneath his feet, the ground rumbled. They both dashed forward, the Doctor pulling out his key and Rose summoning her sword. Thorns burst from the rumbling ground, their vines reaching towards Rose and the Doctor. Swinging her sword, Rose barely sidestepped a vine that attempted to tangle around her ankle. The Doctor to her surprise, actually shifted behind her, letting Rose slice through another vine.

One vine twisted towards her, the three-inch-long thorns moving too close for comfort. In the distance, Rose heard a howl and snarled herself, slamming the blade through three vines at once. The Doctor jumped forward, ducking under another vine and going for the TARDIS door. Spinning around, Rose sliced another vine near the root and backed up towards the Doctor.

“Never saw the TARDIS as a castle,” Rose said.

“You’d be surprised.”
Then she heard the door open. The hum of the TARDIS increased, and she stepped back, nearly falling over another vine. Strong arms caught her and Rose slashed down with her sword to cut the offending vine. As the Doctor pulled her inside, more vines and thorn bushes rose up around the TARDIS. Before the door was kicked shut, the thorns completely blocked Rose’s view of the forest.
Mirror on the Wall: The Tower

Journey Amongst the Stars

By Lumendea

Chapter Five: Mirror on the Wall: The Tower

Disclaimer: I do not own Doctor Who or any of the spinoff material and I gain no income off of this story, just the satisfaction of playing with the characters.

AN: Sorry, but this episode is going to need six chapters instead of the usual five. There was something that I had to include which just made the climax longer than usual.

............... 

The Doctor didn’t have time to stop moving. Once Rose was inside, and the doors were closed, he rushed deeper into the TARDIS. An Eternal. His mind was spinning. He’d hoped for more time before they attacked to teach Rose to control her abilities. As it was, she was too vulnerable to them mentally while that sword made her a threat. It was a dangerous combination. Not for the first time, he cursed the Guardians for putting her in this position.

One positive thing about he and Rose’s exploration adventures in the TARDIS was that he had a much better idea of where things were then he’d had in centuries. During the Time War, he’d collected and scavenged everything he could, but it was easy to lose track of it all. Reaching one of the storerooms, the Doctor paused and glanced back only to sigh in relief. Rose was right behind him. That was good.

“You alright?” Rose asked. “No thorns got you?”

“Nah, I had a fair maiden protecting me.”

That made her smile a little, and the Doctor pushed open the door. Good. He preferred it when Rose was smiling, even if it was only a small smile. The storeroom lit up as the TARDIS did her best to help. Rose followed along after him as he picked up useful bits and pieces and tried to remember exactly how the transitioner worked. He’d only used it the one time, in his seventh body, shortly before the Time War started. It had been a foolish move, but he’d seen the Time War coming and had lost patience with the Eternals. Looking back now, he wondered if them destroying that planet for fun had been one last hurray in this universe before they fled. They’d probably felt the war coming too.
“We need to hurry,” Rose said. “The Grimms are out there alone.”

“I know.” He pulled out the sonic screwdriver, using it to fuse two pieces together with a high-pitched hum that made both him and Rose flinch. “It’s using them as the template. Hopefully, that will keep it from harming them.”

“I hope they’re safer than that,” Rose murmured.

Rose fell silent and let the Doctor work. She watched his hands quickly and expertly assemble an odd looking device that seemed out of a prop department. Small wires were exposed in a few places, and it had a vaguely round shape though small bits were poking out here and there. Yet, it was still small enough to fit in the Doctor’s hand. Leaning against a wall of the TARDIS, Rose focused on her breathing and did her best to stop the headache trying to build behind her eyes. If she hinted to the Doctor that the telepathic attacks of the Eternal were straining her, he’d try to leave her behind, and there was no way she was letting him go out there alone.

“This should stop it,” the Doctor announced. “The biggest problem is that it only has a range of a few feet.” The Doctor adjusted the device, his blue eyes sharp and worried. “And since I’ve done this before, it will likely know what I’m up to, so be ready for all the trouble it can throw at us.” He hesitated and looked at Rose. “I’m sorry, but if this doesn’t work-”

“My sword was created to fight Eternals,” Rose said. She nodded and smiled gently at the Doctor. “It’s okay. I killed a few when the rift opened, remember?” The Doctor’s features darkened and Rose sighed. “I don’t like it, Doctor, but sometimes… well, we can’t let an Eternal just run wild in the Black Forest in 1810 now can we.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too,” Rose said. “You’re going to have to suffer a Disney marathon with me when this is all over so I can get over that Handless monster.” She made a show of shuddering. “No come on, we can’t just stay here. The longer we wait, the worse things are going to get.”

The Doctor nodded and took her hand, squeezing it gently. Rose squeezed back, not needing to say anything. She hated the reality that they were going to be destroying an Eternal at the end of this one way or another, but she didn’t see a way around it.
The wolves stopped and turned to look off in the distance. Jakob leaned a little further from the trunk and frowned in confusion. Once again, the wolves didn’t seem to behave like normal. Then again, he was stunned at there even being a pack of wolves in the area. He thought they’d already been mostly hunted out around here.

“What are they doing?” Wilhelm asked curiously. “More strange behavior.”

“I wonder if these wolves are part of the story as well, part of whatever is doing this’ plan.”

“I wish we knew more, but our new friends aren’t exactly forthcoming.”

“No,” Jakob agreed.

Then to his great surprise, the wolves all took off and ran in the opposite direction. Towards the tower, if he had his bearings right. He blinked as the last gray and white mixed body vanished into the underbrush. Jakob didn’t move, waiting for them to burst out of the bushes and circle the trees once more.

“They all went at once,” Wilhelm said. “As if they heard something or there was a signal.”

“What are you suggesting?” To his horror, Wilhelm began to climb down from the tree. “What are you doing? Get back in the tree this instant!”

“They’ve gone which means they don’t need to keep us here now or there is a larger threat.” Wilhelm dusted off his hands and walked over to stand beneath Jakob’s tree. “We can’t just stay up in trees.”

“Yes, we can! And we should! How long until this creature unleashes more monsters? You know as well as I do some of the things that dwell in the local stories.”

“Stop thinking about it,” Wilhelm ordered. “Try not to think about the stories.”
Jakob grumbled. It was far easier said than done when the forest was becoming a living fairy tale.


Rose grunted as she sliced through the thick vines. They weren’t moving as much, and Rose was sure that the Eternal had turned its attention elsewhere. She desperately tried to remember Tegan’s story about the boating race in space. As powerful as they were, it had seemed like the Eternals still needed help. They’d kidnapped human crews and messed with their heads so that they could run the ships. So they weren’t all powerful. She cut down another vine that tried to twist around her leg. Sharp thorns still made her wary, but they were quickly moving away from the TARDIS.

The forest seemed darker than before. Rose was pretty sure that it was spring or summer given the temperature, but she was beginning to worry about nightfall. The last thing she wanted to do was run around a forest in the dark with fairy tale monsters jumping out at her. They stayed close together and didn’t talk. Questions burned on Rose’s tongue, but this didn’t seem like the time to be distracted with chatter. Her eyes scanned the trees, searching for any sign of the Grimms.

There was another push against her shields. Rose swallowed and pushed back, trying to focus on the shields while keep moving. It was difficult, like trying to juggle and she’d never figured that out. The snap of a stick made them both freeze, but Rose saw nothing. Then she spotted the tower and sighed in relief. Part of her had been sure that the Eternal would move it.

“Do we really think it’s in there?” she whispered.

“It’s the only structure we’ve found so far,” the Doctor said. He didn’t sound convinced. “We at least need to check it out.”

“And it did drive us away earlier,” Rose added, mostly to herself. “Rather than try to lure us in.”

They reached the base of the tower, and the Doctor set his hand against the stone wall with a frown. Rose stayed close to him, and he circled the tower, looking for a way in, but Rose was beginning to worry that they’d have to climb the tower. Backing up, she looked towards the window and frowned. There was no light inside, no strange glow in the night. It looked empty, but she didn’t trust that. In the distance, she thought she heard a low growl. It didn’t sound like the wolves, and a horrible idea occurred to her.
“So, the dragon is Sleeping Beauty was a Disney addition, right?” Rose asked. She couldn’t help but look up into the sky. “We’re not going to wind up with a dragon attacking us.”

“There is no dragon in the original Sleeping Beauty,” the Doctor said. “The original is much worse.” Then he froze and looked up into the sky. “But… there is a dragon in another one of the Grimm’s Fairy Tales.”

“How bad?” Rose asked.

“You know that story about the dragon eating maidens that are sacrificed to it.”

“Yeah, it’s a major fantasy trope.”

“It’s from The Tale of Two Brothers, a Grimm’s Fairy Tale,” the Doctor said. “That dragon had seven heads. Let’s hope that one doesn’t make an appearance.”

Something in his voice really worried Rose. Besides, experience told her that now that the dragon had been mentioned, it was absolutely going to show up. She rechecked the skies as the Doctor pulled out the sonic screwdriver and started scanning the TARDIS. The Eternal had given up on the thorns, but Rose was sure it would be back with more twisted tales.

“No hidden door,” the Doctor announced with a huff. “Not that Eternal needs it.” He smacked the stone wall and backed up. “Nothing for it. Rapunzel! Let down your hair!”

There was no sudden appearance of a rope. Instead, hair began to grow out of the window, bright blonde and clinging to the sides of the tower like ivy. It crept across the rocks, no head in sight, like veins and Rose took a step back, very creeped out. The hair reached the ground and stopped growing as suddenly as it had started.

“Oh, my goodness.”

Rose and the Doctor turned to find the Brothers Grimms standing behind them, expressions of shock and uncertainty on their faces. Wilheim recovered first.
“That wasn’t how it was in the story,” he said. “A bit more… dramatic.”

“I doubt there’s a princess up there,” the Doctor said. He frowned as he looked up. “The question is what is this Eternal playing at.”

“We still don’t understand what you even mean,” Jakob pointed out.

“It isn’t from your world,” the Doctor said bluntly. “It can shape the world around it. It is using the stories as a guideline since they aren’t known for their creativity, but what it’s after I don’t know.” He glanced towards Rose. “Might just be toying with us.”

Above them, a light burst forth from the window, casting a pale green glow on the world. It was a sickly green that was unnatural and put Rose on edge. In the distance, she heard wolves howl, but even the sound of her allies wasn’t enough to calm her. She summoned her sword once more and took a step away from the tower, bracing herself for the next attack.

“Rose I need to go inside,” the Doctor said. He grimaced, but gripped the hair and started to hoist himself up. There were no screams from up above. “You stay here.”

“Uh, no.”

Rose released her sword and started to climb before the Doctor could argue with her. The hair vines held even though the texture was strange on Rose’s hands. It felt like hair. It looked like hair, but her brain was struggling with the way that they grew over the wall like vines and held her weight. The Doctor scrambled up next to her, muttering something that the TARDIS did not translate.

She pulled herself through the window, right hand ready to summon her sword in case someone was waiting for her. The room was empty. No attacker was waiting in the shadows. On the far wall was a mirror with an ornate golden frame. There was nothing else in the circular room, no candles or chairs or bed or tapestries. It was empty except for the mirror which was the source of the green glow. Rose summoned her sword, and the surface of the mirror rippled. Climbing through, Rose stayed on guard as the Doctor followed her through. She blinked in confusion and then looked at the Doctor.

“Is that the Eternal?”
He was frowning at it and holding his device, suddenly looking unsure. He took a step forward, and the surface rippled again. Then he smiled a little and held up his device.

“Hiding again?” he asked. “In a mirror, really? You thought that was the best conduit.”

Rose frowned. Conduit? That seemed like an odd choice of words. “It isn’t here, is it?”

“Sort of,” the Doctor said. “Hiding in another dimension, linked to normal reality through the mirror.” He took a step forward. “That limits your power though.” The Doctor drew closer and closer while Rose waited and tried not to do anything stupid. “What are you after?”

The surface of the mirror rippled once more, and Rose waited for a face to appear. It didn’t. The Doctor seemed unsure still and started to reach towards the mirror. Before he could touch the frame, a strange field appeared around it, glowing the same sickly green. He drew his hand back with a hiss as if burned. Rose hurried forward to check his hand.

“I’m fine,” the Doctor said. He pulled out his sonic screwdriver. “I can get through with the proper resonance frequency.”

Before he could even get started, a roar shook the tower, echoing around them and hanging in the air. Rose knew exactly what it was without even having to rush to the window. Swallowing, she grimaced and looked at the Doctor.

“Shouldn’t have asked about a dragon.”

“Probably not.” The Doctor turned his attention back to the mirror. “I need more time. It shouldn’t attack the tower directly.”

“But nothing can get out,” Rose said. “So it can’t really-”

A wave of light exploded from the mirror. It ran harmlessly past them and outside. The air changed, becoming lighter and Rose heard the wind rush past the window.

“The Eternal just released the barrier,” the Doctor said. He looked towards the window.
Rose tried to feel what he was talking about. There was a difference in the air. It was lighter, not as heavy, but she didn’t understand how the Doctor knew what caused it. What she did understand was that the dragon was now free to pillage the countryside full of innocent people.

“Fine then.” She turned on her heel and went towards the window. “Be careful up here, Doctor.”

“Rose! Where are you going?”

Rose stopped and turned back to smile at the Doctor. “I’m going to go slay the dragon.”

“Rose-”

“I got this,” Rose said. “You deal with that Eternal and its bloody magic mirror.”

His shoulders slumped in defeat, but the worry remained in his eyes. Nodding, he turned back to the mirror, and Rose smiled. Rose reached the window and looked outside. Overhead, a massive seven-headed dragon was circling. Then it landed a short distance from the tower, three heads roaring towards the sky while the other four began to tear up trees and toss them to the side, forming a battlefield. Taking a deep breath, Rose didn’t look back and instead, grabbed some hair and began to climb back down the tower walls.
Slaying the dragon. Rose almost started giggling. Hiding behind the rock outcropping, Rose inhaled slowly and quickly braided her hair to keep it out of her face. There was a dragon on the other side of the rock. An Eternal was creating things out of the Grimm’s Fairy Tales, and now she had to fight a dragon. Overhead, thunder rolled as a storm rolled into the area. Rose could only hope that it brought rain.

She flexed her right wrist, and her sword sprang forth. It was warm in her hand, and Rose was comforted by the familiar slight weight. Before she could calm down too much, a tree crashed past her, and the seven-headed dragon came into view. The giant green beast had massive wings that still didn’t look big enough to let it actually fly. Seven heads roared and looked around atop long serpentine necks. It reminded her of a monster from one of Mickey’s monster movies.

It tore up trees, tossing them around with abandon. She crept closer, scanning the landscape. There were some rough rocks on the hillside, not far away. They were tall in some places and might prove to be a good battleground if she could manage-

A head lunged for her. Rose darted into the rocks. Only one head was able to follow her. It screamed, the sound echoing off the rocks, and making Rose flinch, but she kept moving. Twisting around the dragon, Rose brought up her sword. A faint glow showed through the scales. She brought the sword down with all of her strength before it could breathe. The blade sliced through the fleshy neck, cutting it clean off. Some kind of oil burst out of the veins as the neck was suddenly pulled back. The smell hit Rose’s nose and she gagged. It was a bit too much like gas for her comfort, but she supposed that even an alien generated dragon would need some kind of real fuel for its flames.

“One down. Six to go.” She looked down at her sword. “Why can’t I throw you like Prince Phillip
did in the movie? That would be so much easier.”

There was no answer, and no good fairies suddenly appeared to help her. Beyond the rocks, she heard the dragon screaming. There were crashes as the thing moved and she cautiously poked out her head. The other six heads were roaring in pain. Thankfully they weren’t regrowing like a Hydra’s head. Rose darted away from the rocks, unwilling to linger in the gas and eyed the beast, trying to come up with another plan. She’d already used the rocks for cover? The trees were flammable. What other options did she have?

She didn’t dare lead it to the tower. While that might help split up the heads, it would potentially make everything worse and put the Doctor at risk. Rose glanced back at the tower. The pale green light was still shining out of the window.

Howling filled the air. Despite her earlier experience, Rose couldn’t help but grimace at the sound. In the corner of her eye, she saw shadows rushing through the trees. They were too fast for her to count before they lunged out of the trees. The pack of wolves descended on one of the dragon’s feet, ripping and clawing at it. With a roar of pain, the dragon’s heads twisted around to attack the wolves, leaving Rose alone. After taking a deep breath, Rose shifted to a position between two heads. She swung her sword through the first one, marveling at how easily it sliced through the scales and bone. Her awe quickly turned to disgust as blood poured out. Swallowing bile, Rose spun on her heel and cut off another head. She heard a cry from a wolf and retreated once more behind the rocks.

When she peeked out, the pack was retreating into the trees, leaving her with an angry dragon that still had four heads. At least it didn’t attack the rocks right away. Instead, it seemed dazed and confused. Rose briefly wondered if she’d be lucky enough for it to go into shock. It didn’t. The dragon thrashed around, and Rose desperately hoped that no one in the nearby villages would come to investigate. The sky opened up, and fat raindrops began to fall across the battlefield.

More howls echoed out of the woods, and the dragon’s four heads looked around, watching for the pack. Rose in turn, used the dragon’s distraction to start moving around the side once more, ducking behind piles of upended trees. She peered through the roots of one torn up tree and grimaced in sympathy for the dragon. The stubs had mostly stopped bleeding and were beginning to scab over already, but blood was soaking into the ground, and the thing was wailing. If she had been so worried about a village being destroyed, she would have stopped the attack. As it was, she just felt sorry for the poor thing. It wasn’t its’ fault that an Eternal had made it real.

Then the dragon opened its mouth and began to release long streams of flames. A group of trees caught fire, and the blaze began to spread. Enough dirt had been thrown up by the dragon’s rampage that the fire wasn’t jumping from tree to tree just yet, but Rose couldn’t let things get worse. Another set of howls made the dragon look into the trees to its right, leaving the left side exposed.
Rose darted to the side and slammed her blade into the dragon’s torso. The scales were thick, but they didn’t stand a chance against a Star Knight sword. She sliced through the scales, muscles and into bone and organ. A squishy sound filled Rose’s ears, and she instinctively pulled her sword back, trying to get away from the sound. The dragon snarled and then whined in pain, stumbling her direction. Running away, Rose was thrown to the earth when the dragon collapsed and shook the forest. Scrambling to her feet, Rose turned back to find two dragon’s heads trying to examine the wound.

Distracted. She’d take distracted. Circling around the back of the beast, Rose came up along the uninjured side as quietly as she could. The nearest head was looking around and hissing small flames, but it hadn’t turned back far enough to see her. Before her fear could make her flinch back, Rose charged forward and sliced through the head. Another one down. Three heads to go.

The Doctor flinched as another crash outside echoed in the small space. Before him, the mirror was still shining, and the Eternal had yet to reveal itself. Cursing under his breath, the Doctor adjusted the sonic screwdriver again. If you had told him that he’d be using it to force an Eternal out of a seemingly magic mirror all those years ago when he first built it, he would have thought you mad. Yet, he was here.

“Stop, Doctor,” a voice said. A face appeared in the mirror. It looked vaguely human. “Stop.”

“Stop the dragon and the other attacks,” the Doctor ordered. “And I’ll stop what I’m doing.”

“I cannot.”

“Then I cannot stop.” He adjusted the sonic screwdriver once again. “Your kind have always had a warped sense of fun.”

“This is not for amusement,” the Eternal said. “This was a trap.”

The Doctor almost stilled, but he pushed through his surprise. He’d figured it might be, but to hear the Eternal admit it was something else. The sonic screwdriver hummed in his hand, the device beginning to warm up at the strain he was putting it under.
“A trap? Really? That’s shocking.”

“Not for you,” the Eternal said. “For her.”

“Rose?”

“Spare me, and I will answer your questions,” the Eternal whispered. “She is dangerous, Doctor.”

“Rose Tyler doesn’t have a mean bone in her body.” The Doctor scoffed and turned his attention back to breaking through the defenses. “You should have stayed in the Halls of Eternity.”

“Bad Wolf. Don’t you wonder about those words? You see them so often, and now here you are. I sought to turn them against Rose Tyler with no success. What could overpower the will of an Eternal?”

Silence filled the tower, choking the Doctor. He didn’t want to wonder, but every worry he’d ever had came rushing back. Rose was connected to the Guardians of the Universe. She’d never hidden that, but she also didn’t tell him what was going on. Sometimes, he thought she knew the truth, but other times she seemed so young and unaware. He swallowed and narrowed his eyes at the mirror.

“Don’t play that game with me,” he said. “I won’t fall for it.”

“What did you let onto your TARDIS, Doctor?” Then the Eternal stopped talking, and a bitter chuckled escaped it. “Oh. There’s that strange emotion. That mystery to us. Love, I believe. Even worse, Doctor, what did you let into your hearts. Last of the Time Lords and obsessed with a human child.”

“Thought you were the one trying to convince me that she was dangerous,” the Doctor growled. “Pick on and stick with it.”

Another roar outside spurred him to action. Rose was fighting a dragon, and he was supposed to be dealing with the Eternal. The Doctor stepped closer, ignoring the waves of telepathic energy trying to break into his mind. It rubbed and clawed at him, trying to burrow down. Not long ago, it would have made it, but his shields were stronger now than they’d been since the mid-point of the Time
War. The Doctor adjusted the sonic screwdriver, and the glass of the mirror began to crack. The Eternal started to laugh. The Doctor pushed the device forward.

“I was ready for you, Time Lord,” the Eternal hissed. “That won’t work on me.”

Rose was trying to figure out what to do with the last three heads as she hid behind a tree. It would catch on fire soon. The rain was helping against the fire, but she still had a furious dragon on her hands. Why did it have seven heads? Why not one or even three? She could have handled three with relative ease.

“Oh Lord in Heaven!”

The shout made Rose looked around the tree. Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm were nearby with expressions of shock and terror on their faces. Jakob looked ready to faint. The dragon paused to examine them. Rose’s chest tightened with worry. But it didn’t attack them. The dragon was still tied to the Eternal which was using their minds as its template. Still, the dragon was distracted. Rose hesitated for only a moment. Running forward, she attacked the nearest head, slamming the blade through the flesh and throwing down all of her weight.

The dragon roared. Two heads turned towards her, ready to strike. Then a rock hit one of them. In a surreal moment, Rose and the dragon stared at each other in shock. She had enough awareness to rip her sword out of the bloody stub. She didn’t run away. Two heads left and innocent people who were part of history in the line of literal fire.

Rose slammed the sword into the chest, bypassing the heads and praying that there was a heart somewhere in the chest. It hit something firm, and hard making Rose fear that she’d only struck a bone. Then the whole creature shook. It reared back on its legs, dragging Rose’s feet off the ground. She gasped and gripped tightly to the hilt of her sword with both hands, holding on as the dragon thrashed. A yelp of shock and fear escaped her as the dragon started to roll to the side.

Her sword slipped out and Rose fell several feet to the ground. Rose’s knees and ankles protested as she landed. The sword had slipped from her grip and returned to bracelet form. Rose spun on her heel and ran towards the brothers as the dragon thrashed. Thankfully, they snapped out of her fear and started to run away from the collapsing beast.
The last two heads fell to the ground, eyes rolled back and mouths open with the long tongues hanging out. Around the dragon, the flames were being slowly extinguished by the rain. Rose summoned her sword and waited. The dragon didn’t move, not even a twitch. Before she could go closer to cut off the last two heads, the dragon began to turn to dust. She glanced at the removed heads only to find them vanishing as well. A sigh of relief escaped Rose, but she didn’t move until the last traces of the dragon were gone.

“That’s a lot easier in the stories,” Wilhelm gasped. His face was pale, but he was grinning. “Wow! That was… oh, that was terrifying.”

“Deep breath,” Rose ordered.

She scanned the forest. The fire’s spread was slowing, but there were other concerns. Turning around, she looked back towards the tower. The green light had dimmed, but it was still there.

“Stay here,” she ordered the Grimms.

“What is going on?” Jakob demanded.

“The Doctor and I are taking care of it,” Rose promised. She looked around, the haze was gone, and she thought that she could even see the Grimms’ cart in the distance. “You should go.”

“But-” Wilhelm protested.

“Get to your cart,” Rose ordered. “The thing causing this is using you. If you can slip away now, then everything gets easier.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll be fine.” Rose rolled her eyes and gestured at the spot where the dragon had been. “I can handle this. You need to leave. Never tell anyone about this.”

“Now see here,” Jakob began to protest.
Wilhelm put his hand on his brother’s arm, observing Rose. Then he nodded and pulled his brother back. “No one will ever believe us,” he said. “And she’s right. These dangers are coming from our minds. That dragon would have attacked a village if she hadn’t killed it. The best thing we can do to help is leave before it conjures something more.”

“Thank you,” Rose said. She meant it and regretted not having had more time to talk with the pair.

“But what is causing this?” Jakob asked. “Will it return?”

“No,” Rose said firmly. Up in the tower, a strange rumble began to sound, making Rose look up in alarm. The green light was shifting, and Rose hoped that didn’t mean that the Eternal was making something new. “Go!”

She didn’t wait to watch the brothers go. Rose was vaguely aware that she’d probably be sad about the abrupt goodbye later, but the Doctor might be in danger. Climbing up the side of the tower, Rose almost slipped twice thanks to the rain making the stone wall slick. Above her, the green light kept changing shades and brightness with that strange low rumbling continuing.

Rose was most of the way up the tower when she released that the rumbling was from the tower itself. Stones were beginning to shift. The dragon had vanished, she realized with a start. If the Eternal was destroyed or made human than the tower would vanish.

“Doctor!” Rose shouted. “The tower is starting to come down!”

There was no answer, and she hurried up the last few feet. Hauling herself inside, Rose looked up at the mirror. Large cracks were forming, and the Doctor was holding the strange device he’d created in his left hand near the glass. She couldn’t see his face, but the face in the mirror was shaking and thrashing. Its mouth was open, but no sound was coming out.

“Doctor?”

“Rose! Break the mirror!” The Doctor ordered.

Rose didn’t hesitate. Running forward, she summoned her sword once again. It hit the mirror.
There was resistant, but the glass shattered. A high pitched scream filled the tower. The Doctor grabbed her arm and pulled her away.

“Come on. We need to go!”

Rose didn’t argue as the tower started to sway. Her heart raced, and she dashed back to the window and climbed out. She twisted around and looked back at the mirror. Glowing green shards were on the ground of the tower, but there was no Eternal fleeing them. She didn’t understand and started to climb down.

Her feet hit the ground as bricks from the tower did. Large stones crashed into the earth only to vanish moments later. The Doctor was only seconds behind her and grabbed her hand when he reached the ground. He pulled her back a safe distance and looked at her, checking her over.

“You feeling alright?”

“I’m fine,” Rose said. “The shields were tough, but…” She shrugged. “I’m okay.” Grinning, she added, “I slew a dragon!”

“Yes, yes you did.”

They fell silent, just watching as the tower finished crumbling and the stones quickly vanished. Rose swallowed and caught her breath, fighting back the panicked waves of confusion.

“What happened?”

“I couldn’t reach it,” the Doctor said. He was frowning at the remains of the tower as they vanished. “And it wasn’t trying to escape.”

“Did I kill it when I destroyed the mirror?”

“No.” Then the Doctor dropped her hand and walked forward. Small shards of glass with a greenish shine were laying on the ground. “It’s still here. Trapped in its mirror.”
“Why wouldn’t it just escape?” Rose asked.

“It had a mission.”

“Mission?” Rose’s chest tightened. “Doctor, what was its mission?”

“I’m not sure.” He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and started gathering up the pieces. “I’ll have to scatter these to be sure it can’t reform. I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

Rose didn’t like the sound of that, but a dark cloud was hanging over the Doctor. She didn’t think he’d share his thoughts easily today.

“I sent the Brothers Grimm away,” Rose said. She exhaled and looked around. There was no sign of them. “Hopefully they won’t talk about what happened.”

“No one would believe them,” the Doctor said. He chuckled and stood up, wrapping up the pieces. There didn’t seem to be enough. Rose could only hope that the collapsing tower had ground the rest to dust. “Still, an Eternal here. I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Did it say anything useful?” Rose asked.

“Bad Wolf,” the Doctor said.

Rose’s eyes widened, and she looked up at him. A deep frown was on his face as he stared out into the forest. “Pardon?”

“Bad Wolf. The Eternal said to beware those words. It made me think. I’ve seen those words before. A lot. They’re following us.”

Rose took a deep breath. “Not us,” she said. “Me.”
The Doctor turned to look at her, confusion and a hint of alarm in his gaze. Rose couldn’t manage a smile even though she tried. It wasn’t that she was scared exactly. In his future, the Doctor knew what Bad Wolf meant and wasn’t afraid of it, but in the here and now it seemed big and dangerous.

“What?”

“The words follow me,” Rose explained. “They have for years. During my adventures on Earth, they’d pop up here and there.” She shrugged. “That’s what Lumen, my living painting, said to me when she whispered to me. Bad Wolf.”

“You’re sure?”

“Very, but it isn’t a bad thing,” Rose rushed to say. The Doctor didn’t look convinced. “You, a future you, will tell me that it’s okay. Bad Wolf is… I’m not sure what it is, but usually, it’s a warning. Hearing it or seeing it lets me know that danger is coming. It warns me to be ready.” She gestured out into the forest. “As for the wolves, I’m not sure how it impacts them, but it helps me in weird ways.”

“And it doesn’t worry you.”

“It did,” Rose admitted. “But as I said, you will tell me that it’s safe. That it isn’t going to hurt me.” Smiling at the Doctor now, Rose felt a bit better. “I trust you.”

The Doctor didn’t smile. He still seemed to be struggling with something about Bad Wolf and what the Eternal said. His blue eyes were sharp and thoughtful as he stared at her. Somehow, Rose didn’t flinch under the gaze. She knew he was worried, but not angry at her. It was almost a marvel to see him thinking, brainstorming and discarding ideas at a rapid pace. At the back of Rose’s mind, her suspicions stirred, but she didn’t let the thought fully form. That always felt too dangerous.

Instead, Rose held out her hand to the Doctor. He took it without any hesitation. A small smile appeared on his face before he sighed. With that, the Doctor guided Rose back towards the TARDIS as the natural sounds of the forest sung to them.
Human Nature: Back to School

Journey Amongst the Stars

By Lumendea

Chapter Seven: Human Nature: Back to School

Disclaimer: I do not own Doctor Who or any of the spinoff material and I gain no income off of this story, just the satisfaction of playing with the characters.

AN: I decided to do something different with Human Nature. There are a lot of rewrites that put Rose in the past at the school with the Doctor, but I personally think the TARDIS chose that era to ensure that Martha would open the watch because she’d desperately want to leave.

…………………..

Rose sped up her walking speed and followed the walkway between the massive gothic buildings around her. More people about her age were rushing about in a hurry with bags and cups of coffee. She took a sip of her tea from her travel mug and stepped around another group of students. A soft sigh escaped her, but Rose kept moving.

Boredom was hard. It wasn’t usually a problem that Rose had. Life on the TARDIS was always intense and exciting and her student life before that had been fairly interesting as well. Pushing such thoughts aside, Rose entered the old gothic building that housed numerous faculty offices and took the now familiar path up to the third floor. There was a line of doors with small wavy glass windows. Most had fancy nameplates attached to them, but one had a much cheaper looking plate that was designed to swap out easily. This nameplate said: Professor John Smith.

Knocking on the door, Rose waited until she heard the call to come in and then pushed open the door. It was a small office with a desk and several bookshelves that were filled with books on many different subjects. A few knick knacks here and there lent some personal touches, but Rose knew that they weren’t anything special. The man behind the desk gave Rose pause. He looked like the Doctor but wasn’t. His blue eyes were intelligent but not as much as the Doctors and lacked the sorrow that the Doctor always carried. The familiar leather jacket was gone and in its place was an understated tweed jacket over a shirt and tie matched with dark pants. He looked every inch the professor he was supposed to be.

“Ah, Rose, good morning.”
“Morning, Professor Smith,” Rose said.

“Did you bring me tea?”

“No,” Rose answered. “This is mine. Get your own.”

“You make much better tea.”

“I’ll tell my mum you think so.”

Rose sat down in the chair in front of the desk. She took a long sip of her tea to taunt the professor who scowled at her even as his eyes sparkled with amusement. That helped a little. Her eyes took in the office, and she was very aware of the weight of the pocket watch hanging around her neck and hidden under her shirt. At this rate, it was a wonder that her neck wasn’t being dragged down by all the weight of her various necklaces.

“How was your weekend, Rose?”

“Good. A couple of my friends came to visit me,” Rose answered. “We had a mellow weekend, but it was nice to see them.”

“How did they like our school?”

“They liked it fine,” Rose said. “They’d never been to Oxford before.”

Rose curled her nose a bit as she said it. Why had the TARDIS picked Oxford? Couldn’t they be at Cambridge with the Chestersons…. Then again, Ian and Barbara would probably be too fascinated by the notion of a human Doctor. And with their weird aging, they might have been targets of the Family as well. She shivered a bit at the idea and hoped that Oxford was far enough away from them if the Family did show up. She could swallow what school pride she had for everyone’s sake.

“How do you like it here?” the Professor asked. He seemed truly interested, and Rose smiled.
“The people are nice enough,” she said.

“You’re bored, aren’t you?”

Rose blushed at the blunt observation and the way he smiled. Then she shrugged and nodded a little before taking another sip of her tea.

“A bit.”

“It’s not as exciting as the jungle,” he agreed. “But fewer insects.”

“That’s true.”

Rose’s eyes moved over to the books on the shelf about the Mayan ruins in the jungles of Central America. Then Professor John Smith’s features twisted into a very familiar thoughtful and worried expression. Rose started to worry about what could be wrong. They’d arrived to find a flat and a guest professor position waiting for him. He had a job, money, and memories of an ordinary human life so what did he have to be so nervous about.

“Rose, about what happened before we, uh…” He trailed off, and his read turned red. “Maybe we should talk about it. We were just friends then, but now you’re a student at the university where I’m teaching.”

Rose tensed despite herself. What did he think had happened? She frowned, thinking back to when they’d gotten started at the university. Professor Smith had introduced her as his assistant from a dig in Central America. There was a strange story of how they’d met while she was traveling and had decided to stick around, doing odd jobs around the camp and being very useful. Rose wasn’t clear on all the details, but she had enough hints that to be able to take part in conversations.

“Talk about it?” Rose repeated.

Professor Smith’s blush spread, and he glanced towards the door. “The night before we left the dig and we drank too much and…”
His tone left Rose with no confusion as to what he thought had happened. Panic followed by a need to laugh hysterically welled up in her chest, but somehow Rose kept calm. Her mind tried to come up with something to say, but she obviously had no memory of the event he was thinking of. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out. She had to swallow and try again.

“It happened,” Rose said. She shrugged and almost choked. “I don’t think now is the time.” Something flickered in his eyes and Rose’s heart might have jumped a beat. “Let’s talk about it when I finish my masters, and I’m no longer an ethics violation,” she said gently. “It won’t be long, and then we can have that conversation, including about what happens after we’re both done with our obligations here.”

“Right.” He swallowed and smiled a little at her, seemingly a bit relieved. “You’re right. You usually are.” Then he cleared his throat. “Well, I hope that classes keep going well.”

Rose nodded. There was a knock on the door, and Professor Smith jumped a little in his chair, but quickly seemed to recover. Giving her an apologetic look, he called for the person to come in. A tall, older woman dressed in a neatly pressed pencil skirt and blouse strode in. She apologized but walked forward to hand Professor Smith a stack of documents.

“I wanted to get this to you before your class.”

Professor Smith nodded and took the papers. He glanced at Rose, but she saw a good time for retreat when she saw it. Giving him a soft smile, Rose slipped out of the office only to realize a few moments later that Professor Tilling had followed her out.

“He’s an odd man,” Professor Tilling said. She was smiling a little with mild amusement. “Lovely, but odd.”

“He is a bit,” Rose agreed cautiously. She didn’t love someone paying the Doctor’s human self that much attention.

“You worked on the Central American dig with him, didn’t you?”

“Not officially,” Rose answered. “It was sort of an accident. I was traveling down there and came into camp when they were having trouble with the generators and a car.” Rose shrugged and recited the story she’d heard Smith tell. “I’m good with things like that and fixed it all up. Decided to stick around. Ended up keeping him and the rest of the team mostly out of trouble.”
“And now you’re here?” There was something curious in the woman’s tone.

“Well, he is a bit absent-minded professor,” Rose said. She gestured at the door with a smile. “And it brought me back to England for a bit, so I don’t mind.”

“You’re working on a masters in Mathematical and Theoretical Physics, are you not?”

“Yes.” Rose was trying to stay polite. Then Tilling shook her head and chuckled. “Well, I hope you enjoy your time at Oxford.”

“Thank you.”

Then, to her relief, Professor Tilling headed down the hallway back to her office. Rose blinked and struggled to breathe. She’d known that the TARDIS gave the Doctor memories of a human life, but this had not been what she was expecting. Shaking her head, Rose decided to get to her first class and see if she could handle paying attention. She hadn’t had much luck with that so far in this twisted adventure.

………..

Rose unlocked the door and pushed it open with a tired groan. Her flat was nice. Almost as nice as her place in Cambridge, but less lived in. This wasn’t home, and in the past two weeks, Rose had done nothing to try and make it home. She set her bag down on the counter of the kitchen. Switching on the light, Rose scanned the room and noted with relief that everything was where she left it.

Paranoia. She was too young for paranoia, but under the circumstances, it felt justified. Turning around, she locked up the front door and headed to the back room of the flat. The bed that had come with the place was pushed up into one corner leaving plenty of space for the TARDIS that was parked in the middle of the room.

Rose pulled her TARDIS key out and quickly unlocked the familiar blue doors, running a hand over them lovingly. The TARDIS was dim with most of the lights turned off. It felt empty, almost ghostly to Rose as she walked up to the console. When she touched it, there was a low, soft hum beneath her hand.
“Hello, Beautiful,” Rose greeted. “Funny thing happened today. Apparently, Professor John Smith has some rather interesting memories of me.” Her embarrassment and frustration returned full force. “Honestly, what were you thinking, making him believe that we’ve slept together? I’m lucky that he’s comfortable at all with me!”

The TARDIS hummed in a way that almost seemed like a grumble, and Rose rolled her eyes. “We’re working on it,” she scolded. “You need to leave it alone. Besides, if anything happened while he was a human, he’d freak out!”

Rose glared at the TARDIS as it stayed silent. She was right, and she knew it, but it seemed that the TARDIS was growing impatient. That was utterly ridiculous given that she was time ship. Still, Rose couldn’t stay mad at the ship. Right now, she was too dark and sad for her stay angry for long.

“I suppose him being attracted to me is better than him becoming involved with a human. That would have been a mess.” Rose admitted. The lights flashed weakly. “Oh, don’t pretend that’s the reason you did it!”

The TARDIS didn’t respond, and Rose huffed. It’s true that was hopefully one issue she didn’t have to worry about. Emotions churned in Rose’s chest that she didn’t know how to navigate. She sighed and lowered her head, feeling exhaustion press down on her.

A soft, sympathetic hum echoed around her, and Rose nodded. “I know, you miss him too.” Sighing, she leaned against the console. “I suppose that I should at least be grateful that we’re in my home time. That makes things easier.”

Unsure of what to do with herself, Rose went to the screen and brought up the short video that the Doctor had recorded. After the strange encounter in the office, Rose needed to see his face as his own and see him in his eyes. The video started to play, and the Doctor sat down in front of the camera. Exhaustion hung over his shoulders, and he sighed out loud.

“Okay, Rose,” he said. “I know that there hasn’t been time for a good explanation and for that I’m sorry. I’m about to use the machine to turn human. It’s not going to be pretty.”

Rose shivered at the memory of the screaming. She hadn’t been allowed to touch him and had been useless to help him. Swallowing, she shook herself and kept watching the video, drinking in the sight of her Doctor when he was still whole.
“The TARDIS will find a safe place for us. I don’t know what period she’ll take us to, but it should be human since we’ll both be human.” The Doctor grimaced slightly, but his eyes were thoughtful. “She likes you, so I’m not too worried, but you need to be careful. I’ve got some rules. You’ve very capable, but humour me.” He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. Rose hated seeing how scared he’d been. “One, don’t let me abandon you. The TARDIS should give us some kind of history together, but don’t let me do anything too stupid.”

Rose almost snorted at the “history together” remark.

“Two, don’t let me hurt anyone. You know what humans can be like. Don’t let me be an arse. Three, don’t worry about the Tardis. I’ll put her on emergency power so they can't detect her. She’ll be fine, but she won’t be able to help you. Just setting us up in the era she chooses will drain her reach.” Rose still had questions about that. “Four, don’t get involved in big historical events. Keep your head down and stay safe. If things go south, worry about yourself more.” Even the way he said it on the recording indicated that he didn’t think she would. “Five, if the Family finds us, then open the watch. I’m trying to avoid this turning into a bloodbath, but if they press the issue…” He sighed and nodded. “I trust your judgement. I’m sorry about this. Thank you, for being willing to protect me.”

Rose thought she heard more in the thank you than just those words. His eyes were soft at the end despite his worry and fear. It both helped and made everything worse. She was homesick for a person in a way that Rose didn’t know a person could be. Unable to stay in the TARDIS alone anymore, Rose patted the console and headed for the door. Behind her, the TARDIS hummed softly in what might have been an apology for the trouble she’d caused, and Rose couldn’t stay angry.

Returning to the living room, Rose set up her laptop on the desk and started working on a new assignment. It was more habit than anything else. She wasn’t going to stay for the whole year to complete the masters, but she did need to keep her head down. They needed to blend in. Her video call software beeped, and Rose perked up when she noted the call was from Kate. She quickly answered, checking the older woman’s face as it appeared. Thankfully, she didn’t look worried.

“Hey, Kate.”

“Hello, Rose.”

“Any news?”
“No, just checking in,” Kate said gently. “Nothing unusual has been detected.”

“Right, okay.” Rose shrugged. “That’s good.”

“You’re bored to death, aren’t you?” Kate teased. The scientific leader of UNIT UK smiled at her, almost glowing with amusement. “That’s hilarious.”

“Haha,” Rose said. “Maybe a little. I’ve been on Earth for two weeks and just… nothing.” She tossed her hands up and leaned closer to the screen. “It was never this quiet when I was really in school.”

“Technically you are back in school.”

“It’s not the same thing,” Rose countered. “Besides, I don’t care about the Masters degree, so once the three months are up, I’m out of here.”

“Your mother might care.”

“Mum doesn’t know that I’m on Earth,” Rose said. She narrowed her eyes at Kate. “And she’s not going to find out. I don’t need her trying to convince me to stay.”

“You haven’t seen her?”

“I did the first weekend here. I let her think that the Doctor had dropped me for a visit,” Rose admitted. “That’s it. I want to be ready to move just in case.”

Something like maternal disapproval crossed Kate’s face, but she didn’t lecture Rose. “Well, nothing has crossed our radar in the UK,” Kate said. “And I’m keeping it quiet.”

“Thank you. I don’t want this in any files,” Rose said. “Even for him, changing species was…”

“Only I know,” Kate promised. “It’ll stay that way. I’m not interested in drawing attention to him either, but if you need help, you only have to call me.”
The promise warmed Rose. It might be a bit strange that the TARDIS has brought them to her home time, but there were many advantages. Rose had been able to slip into life as a masters student at Oxford with the Doctor as a visiting professor without any trouble. They had allies nearby in case of trouble. It was a lot easier than it could have been. When the Doctor had said that the TARDIS would take them somewhere, she’d been worried about where she might end up.

“You should look up my son Gordon while you’re there,” Kate said. “You’ve never had the chance to meet him.”

“I’ll think about it,” Rose said. “But there’s a lot that could go wrong. I’d rather not pull someone else into this.”

That wasn’t a lie. Kate knew some of the basics. She’d gotten an alert that Rose Tyler had enrolled in Oxford and had come investigating. Rose had told her about the Family, but not revealed the watch about her neck. As much as she trusted Kate, she wasn’t going to risk the wrong person saying something about the watch. There was too much about the Family she didn’t know.

The call ended, and Rose groaned, slumping into the sofa that had come with the place. It wasn’t nearly as nice as her old one, and she briefly regretted giving her old furniture to Luke. Then again, storing it hadn’t made any sense. She hadn’t planned on returning to Earth to live. But she was. The Doctor was human, he thought they’d slept together, and the Family was hunting him. Perfect.
Rose made it through another week without any issues, and she was becoming optimistic that maybe the plan would work. The Monday of their fourth week back on Earth began with the sun shining and Rose having a bit of pity on Professor John Smith. She took him a mug of tea and nodded in greeting to the other professors in the history department. If any of thought it was odd that she checked in on him so often, they stayed quiet and probably attributed it to Professor Smith’s habit of forgetting things and staring off into space. Rose had noticed and worried already about the way that he tended to look off in the distance and seemingly struggle to catch a lost thought. She supposed that it was difficult to remove a mind like the Doctor’s completely.

After her classes, Rose checked that the watch was still around her neck despite being able to feel the weight. Then she headed to a nearby sandwich shop that was popular with students, intending to grab something on the go and slip into one of Professor Smith’s afternoon classes. She had just gotten her ham and cheese sandwich when someone came up behind her.

“Rose?”

She hissed and grimaced, recognizing the voice at once. It had probably been foolish to think that she could avoid him, but she’d tried. And apparently had failed. Why couldn’t the TARDIS pick a school in Scotland? They didn’t know anyone there.

“Hey, Luke.” Turning around, she smiled at her godson who was already scanning the area around them. “Everything is fine,” she rushed to reassure him. “Nothing dangerous.”

Rose gave him a look and pointedly swept her eyes through the room. Thankfully, Luke got the message and nodded. A couple of young men waved at Luke, and he waved back. They looked curiously at Rose, but she ignored them.

"Why are you here?" Luke asked.

"You don’t need to worry about it," Rose answered.

"That’s not going to work," Luke said. He sounded a great deal like his mum at that moment, and it almost made Rose smile. "Where’s the Doc-"

"Don’t," Rose hissed. She looked around nervously, and Luke finally caught on.

"My place is close," Luke said. "Come on."

She wanted to argue, but could already see that it was pointless. He was, after all, his mother’s son. Sighing in resignation, Rose nodded to Luke before gesturing to the door.

"Okay, lead on."

Luke lived in a small studio close to campus. Her old sofa was the main focus on the room with Luke’s bed in a nearby corner. His desk was covered in odd electronic bits and pieces which made Rose smile. The rest of the place was a mess with laundry lying about. Luke might be genetically perfect, but he was a slob when compared to his little sister.

"Sorry!" Luke rushed forward to pick up a bit of the mess.

Rose turned to the door and securely locked it. She was tempted to pull on the sonic pen and check for any odd technology, but just then K-9 rolled out from under the bed.

"Mistress Rose."

"Hello, K-9." Rose knelt and patted the robot dog on the head. "How are you, boy? Watching over
“Luke?”

“Affirmative, Mistress Rose.”

“So what is going on Rose?” Luke pressed. “I mean the other day I thought that I saw the Doctor through a crowd but-”

“Do not approach him!” The words were sharper than Rose wanted.

“What’s wrong with him?”

“Nothing is wrong with him exactly.” Rose sighed again, feeling a headache gathering behind her eyes. “He’s human.”


“Because I don’t want the companions coming up here to see him,” Rose said. She slumped into her old sofa. “And as much as I love your mum, I know that Sarah Jane would want to see what is going on.” Luke didn’t argue with her and smiled a bit sheepishly. “You know I’m right,” Rose added.

“I know.” Luke leaned closer. “So, what is going on?”

“Luke… maybe it’s best if you just-”

“No. Tell me, or I call Mum and Gran.” The threat made Rose flinch, and she glared at him. Luke’s lips started to quirk into a smile, but he kept control of himself. “Rose.”

“The Doctor and I ran into this group of aliens,” Rose explained. “They’re... well he didn’t have much time to explain. He did warn me that they are gaseous in their native states, but can possess other creatures for lack of a better word.”

“What happened?”
“They want to consume the Doctor’s lifeforce,” Rose said. “He said that consuming a Time Lord would make them immortal, but they are violent and very self-serving with access to dangerous technology.”

“So, he hid here and now?”

“It’s more than just hiding. The Doctor rewrote his DNA,” Rose admitted. “He’s human for the time being. They can’t sniff out a simple human. They’ll die in three months. He’s waiting them out to avoid a confrontation.”

“Wow.” Luke blinked and then shook his head. “So he’s here.”

“Professor John Smith, a visiting professor of archeology.” Rose smiled a little. “The TARDIS set everything up for us. When I opened the TARDIS door, I was in a new flat that someone she or I suppose myself from the future arranged.”

“Oh. Sorry I have your old furniture then.”

“It’s only for three months. Two months and a week now.” Rose inhaled slowly and then fixed Luke with a firm gaze. “But can you understand why I don’t want you telling anyone. This is dangerous, Luke.”

“Does anyone else know?”

“Kate Stewart and that’s only because she found out that I was on Earth. She’s covering for me with UNIT and is keeping an eye on the skies along with Spock.”

“Spock knows?”

“Not the details,” Rose admitted. “But I am still his primary controller. But, Luke, I mean it. Companions have Artron energy, and too much of that is one place might be enough to draw the Family’s attention. The Doctor didn’t have time to answer questions like that for me, so I’m trying to be as careful as possible.”
“I see,” Luke said slowly. Then he exhaled. “Okay then, that’s fair.”

“So you’ll keep your distance.”


“Maybe.” Rose knew that she would avoid putting her godson in danger.

“And I’ll tell Gordon to keep his distance just in case he’s seen photos. He probably has.”

“Wait, you know Gordon?”

“Yes. He’s older than me, but we hang out sometimes.” Luke raised an eyebrow at her. “You’re not the only one who talks with the other companions you know. He came over his grandfather after the whole deaging thing after you and the Doctor were gone.”


“You should while you’re here.”

“No. No, if the Family shows up, then I don’t want them to be able to pick out people who are important to me.” Rose stood up and started to pace. “Don’t tell Gordon everything. Just tell him that we’re hiding and to keep his distance. Kate would skin me alive if I put her son in danger.” Rose shuddered at the very idea. “Why did the TARDIS pick Oxford? Edinburgh would have fine. That could have been fun.”

“Scotland is cold.”

“I’ve walked on ice planets. Cold doesn’t bother me that much.” Rose stopped and gave Luke a soft smile. “I’m sorry. I am happy to see you.”
“You’re just worried,” Luke said. He looked down at K-9 who had been very silent. “Do you know anything about the Family or this device the Doctor used, boy?”

“Negative, Master Luke. That information is not in my database.”

“Spock doesn’t know anything about them either,” Rose said. “He had some theories as to their species, but he couldn’t nail it down. If they show up, I’m going to have to figure out how to stop them. Hence the preference for them learning nothing.”

Rose shivered again. She’d thought of it too much already. Spock had helped her with finding a weakness to the Slitheen. If the worst happened then maybe, she could do it again. Luke stood up and walked over, wrapping his arms around her in a hug. Rose automatically returned the affectionate gesture. It did help her feel better.


“It’s fair that you’re worried,” Luke said. “But staying alone may just make you stand out. And maybe the TARDIS brought you here rather than Scotland so that you would have backup.”

“If I put you in danger, your mother is going to kill me,” Rose said. “And then your grandmother will bring me back somehow so that she can kill me.”

Luke looked like he wanted to argue and Rose almost snorted. The boy really didn’t know his grandmother and mother as well as he thought. Then again, the most irritated Sarah Jane had ever been with him was over the state of his bedroom. Right now, with him away at university, it was probably the cleanest it had ever been.

Rose stayed longer than she should have. It was too tempting to catch up with Luke. He was doing so well at university and had moved past his socially awkward phase. While he was making new friends, he was eager to update her on Clyde and Rani who were finally dating. It was clear that Luke still regarded them as his best friends.

But she did eventually leave, doing her best to slip out of the building without being seen. Night had fallen, and the crisp autumn air hung around Rose as she walked back to her flat. It made her miss her motorcycle. Overhead, she could see some stars over the light of Oxford. The city wasn’t as bright as London, but the streets were lined with lamps. She missed them, Rose realized. She missed opening the doors while the Doctor tinkered and playing her violin or trying to paint a
nebula. She missed him.

Then her phone rang, and Rose pulled it out. An unexpected name showed on the screen, and Rose answered it urgently.

“Spock?” Rose glanced around and sped up, wanting to reach home faster. “What’s up?”

“Rose, I have detected something very small coming towards Earth.”

“Any chance it is a comet or a meteorite?” Rose asked.

“I do not believe so. Thus far, I have detected no signals coming from it, but I will track the object. Shall I attempt communication?”

Rose hesitated. If it was the Family, then that was dangerous. They stole any technology that could help them in their quest to become immortal. She remembered the Doctor’s horror when they’d been able to follow them through time.

“No,” Rose answered. “Send a message to UNIT. Let them try to make contact. I don’t want to risk them tracing anything back to you. UNIT will try to contact them anyway once they get closer.” She felt a little guilty, but she hadn’t been kidding with Luke about the Artron energy.

Rose finally reached the door of her building and quickly let herself in. The hall light was bright, but Rose still checked the shadows as she readied her keys.

“As you wish,” Spock said. “K-9 sent me a request for information earlier.”

“I thought he was out of range here.”

“Luke recently boosted his signal,” Spock said drily. “We have been able to resume our chess matches.”

Rose chuckled and opened the door of her flat. “Good.” She switched on the light and glanced
around. “Thank you for the heads up, Spock. Keep me updated.”

“I will do so,” Spock promised. “At their current rate, I suspect that they will arrive in two days.”

Rose nodded even if the computer couldn’t see it and secured the door. Two days. A lot could happen in two days. She briefly considered going to Professor Smith’s flat to check on him before dismissing the idea. As tempting as it was, given the memories the TARDIS had given him, it wasn’t a good idea. Even if his place was only two streets over, Rose suddenly wished that the TARDIS had put them into a different situation where they were closer.

Professor Smith reviewed his lecture notes with a small frown. That nagging sense that he was forgetting something had been haunting him all morning. Reaching into his briefcase, he pulled out the moleskin notebook he’d picked up a few weeks ago and opened it. Dates and careful notes were written down in his scrawl line by line. He picked up a pen and on a blank page noted down the date. Frantically, he started writing down the fragments of his strange dream that remained rattling around in his head.

It was all foggy, but writing it down helped dispel that sense that he was forgetting something. Not for the first time, he wished that his hands had a talent for drawing, but that never felt right for his hands. He flexed his fingers as a vague figment of a dream came roaring back. He’d been sculpting a woman with… Michelangelo lecturing him. The very idea made him snort in amusement, but he wrote it down. Odd to imagine that he could do that when he could manage anything beyond stick figures. Then again, it was a different sort of skill, and he’d always thought that he had workman’s hands.

When he finished writing down what he remembered of last night’s dream, he shoved the notebook back in his suitcase. It wouldn’t do any good for anyone to find it. The ramblings could be easily dismissed except for the role that Rose played in so many of the dreams. Just thinking about how often she appeared made him blush in shame.

A knock on his door made him look up sharply. The shape on the other side of the wavy glass didn’t look like Rose. It wasn’t his office hours, and he wasn’t interested in talking to anyone right now, so he ignored it. They knocked again, and he narrowed his eyes on the door. Holding back a sigh, he gathered up his notes again and spread them out in front of him.

“Come in.”
Professor Tilling walked in with a soft smile. “Good morning, Professor Smith.”

“Good morning, Professor Tilling.” He paused. “Did I miss another meeting?”

“No, not this time thankfully.”

“Good. I mean, I’m glad that I haven’t forgotten another meeting.”

Professor Tilling looked at him closely and then chuckled. “I suppose that returning to academia has been a major transition for you. After five years on various digs back to back.”

“Yes.” John looked down at his notes. He didn’t want to talk about all of that.

“Please forgive me, but I did some digging into your life prior to those years.” John flinched, and Professor Tilling lowered her eyes. “I apologize. And my condolences. I’m very sorry about your family.”

“It’s fine.” John didn’t try to smile, but he forced his shoulders to relax. “Getting away helped, but it’s time to move forward.”

“Still… I am very sorry. I felt that I should disclose that I pried.”

“I appreciate your honesty.”

Professor Tilling nodded and started to turn towards the door. Then she stopped and looked back at him, seeming uneasy. John wondered why she didn’t just leave after bringing up the very thing that sent him running away from England in the first place.

“You and Miss Tyler seem very close,” Professor Tilling said. “She’s always stopping by.”

John snorted, but smiled fondly. Somehow thinking of Rose always cut through his self-pity.
“Yeah. I think she doesn’t believe that I can take care of myself."

“It makes one wonder what happened in Central America."

John shook his head. “Series of troublesome events. No one got hurt, thank goodness, but it was a near thing. We kept having trouble: cars, radios, and other equipment. Rose finding us was pure luck for us. She took pity on us.”

“So, she was just wandering around?”

“She is an adventurer at heart,” John said. He pointed to a small painting on a shelf. It showed a nebula that was blurred slightly like it was being viewed through a window. “She’s an artist with a talent for machines. Rose was down there doing art and visiting a friend in the area.”

“An interesting life for someone so young.” Professor Tilling smiled as she examined the various objects on the shelves. “I envy you all the places you’ve been.”

“There are good things and bad things.” John shuddered. “The bugs are a plague.”

Tilling laughed and turned back to him. “So why did Rose come to Oxford with you? That seems odd.”

John swallowed and did his best to keep his features neutral. “After months in the jungle, I think she was just as ready to come back as I was. But she’s avoiding her mother.” He shrugged, and his cheek ached for a moment which confused. “They have an odd relationship. Rose doesn’t talk about it much. Not sure what she plans to do with her master’s degree, but I suspect she’s already bored here. She may leave.” He didn’t like the idea, but he knew that Rose wasn’t being challenged in class. It just didn’t seem to be what she cared about. “Still, she’s a good friend.”

Tilling nodded slowly and looked ready to say something. Then she shook her head. “Well, you aren’t her professor, so I suppose it isn’t a real issue. Just be careful, Professor Smith. You could have a good future in the department.”

He didn’t ask what she meant. He just prayed that he wasn’t blushing. Maybe he needed to pull back from Rose a little. She was bored. As much as he wanted her nearby, he didn’t want her bored and wasting her time. Then again, part of him wanted her to. He was older than her. Far too much
older and yet… He nodded to Professor Tilling as she showed herself out and then slumped in his chair to brood. Of all the people to develop feelings for so long after Verity and Carole’s deaths, he had to go for the young woman he’d never told about them.

His phone alarm rang, and Professor Smith stood up. He gathered up his notes and tossed them into the briefcase. Without any more thought to the notebook, the strange dreams, his past, or Rose, he headed for his first lecture of the day. It was time to focus on the here and now.
Human Nature: Rose’s Watch

Journey Amongst the Stars

By Lumendea

Chapter Nine: Human Nature: Rose’s Watch

Disclaimer: I do not own Doctor Who or any of the spinoff material and I gain no income off of this story, just the satisfaction of playing with the characters.

AN: I’m doing a lot better now! The numbness in my wrist and hand is all gone now. Thank you for all the well wishes.

………………

Two days passed without any incident. Rose attended classes, did homework, and spoke with Luke over a cup of coffee. Spock tracked the ship, and Rose had assurances from Kate that UNIT was keeping an eye on it. She’d never considered herself a control freak, but Rose really wished that she could do more. Just waiting and worrying was killing her.

She crossed campus with short, determined strides with two travel mugs of tea in hand. Glancing around, Rose checked her surroundings to make sure everything was safe and noted a few familiar faces. Honestly, it was a lot like her time at Cambridge. She wasn’t very social outside of classes, but she was far more paranoid then she’d been then. Her bag rested against her hip, and she could feel the weight of the watch around her neck. The temptation to look at it was sometimes overwhelming, but it only made her sad, and she didn’t want anyone to see it.

No one even looked her way as she headed for Professor Smith’s office. The halls were still mostly empty at this hour. Adjusting the mugs, Rose knocked on the door and waited. There was no answer, but she thought that she heard something. She hesitated for a moment. It wasn’t time for his office hours yet, but there was a possibility that he was with a student. Then again, she showed up at this time every morning during the week to check on him. Rose bit her lower lip for a moment and then turned the doorknob, being mindful not to spill the tea.

Professor Smith’s head was pillowed on his folded arms. He looked awkward leaning over the desk due to his long frame. Rose had never seen him sleeping in the office. She stepped inside quickly and closed the door gently. He was breathing, and Rose told herself not to panic. Then he mumbled something in his sleep. Stepping forward, she carefully set down the mugs and listened.

“Verity.” His whole body shuddered, and he seemed to be trying to shake his head.
Confusion hit Rose before anything else, and she reviewed the names of all the companions she knew about. There was no Verity, at least not as far as she knew. It was an odd name, a bit old fashioned, but pretty in its own way. When John whispered it again, something more like jealous began to take hold. Then John shuddered, and his hands tightened into fists. The jealousy was pushed back as worry took hold.

“Carole,” he whimpered.

“Professor Smith?” He didn’t wake up, and Rose glanced at the door before speaking louder. “Professor Smith, wake up.” John moved a little but didn’t wake up.

Rose hesitated to touch him. She’d woken the Doctor that way only once, and he’d come to with wide, panicked eyes and struggling to breathe. Suddenly, she wished that the TARDIS has provided her with a full dossier on the history that she gave John Smith.

“John,” Rose called. She moved closer to the desk and put the mugs down. “John, it’s Rose, please wake up. I think you’re having a nightmare.”

Thankfully, he started to wake. He groaned and stretched a little before lifting his head.

“Rose?” He blinked at her. “What are you doing here?” A faint blush colored his cheeks. Then he looked around in surprise. “Oh, my office. Right. Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Rose said. She picked up a mug and held it out to him.

“Thank you,” he said. He accepted the mug and took a long sip. “You make brilliant tea.”

“You should try my banana bread.” The words slipped out, and she braced herself for a disappointing reaction.

“Sounds good. I love bananas.” He slumped in his chair and looked wistful. “I missed them in the jungle. That sounds crazy, but we really didn’t get a lot of fresh stuff.”
“I remember,” Rose said. The way he talked worried her. It was like he forgot that she had been there, at least in his memories. “I don’t recall you mentioning bananas.”

“I try not to linger on things I can’t have.”

That was something that Rose didn’t want to touch with a ten-foot pole. The way he was looking at her made her uneasy. This wasn’t the Doctor. Sort of, there were things that had carried over, but it wasn’t him. She wasn’t going to do anything stupid here.

“You okay?” Rose sat down opposite him. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. “You kept muttering a name? Was it a nightmare?”

“I- I think so.” John seemed unsure of where he was and what was going on. “Sorry, Rose. I haven’t been sleeping well.”

“Any particular reason?” Rose set the second mug of tea she’d brought in front of him. “You’re not feeling ill, are you?”

“No, just dreams.” He shook his head as if to clear it. “Sometimes they’re strange, wild dreams. I’m some sort of adventurer.”

“Adventurer?” Rose wasn’t sure what to make of that. “Are you the Indiana Jones type of archeologist?”

“No.” John snorted a little but smiled. “I’m an alien, I think, and I have this ship that looks like a blue box and travels in time.” He took a drink of his tea while Rose froze in shock. “You’re there too, most of the time, traveling with me.”

“I guess even if your dreams, you know you need looking after,” Rose managed. Her voice was a bit off, and John looked at her. “Sounds interesting,” she added. “And exciting. I can see why you wake up still tired.” Rose turned it over in her head. “So, who are Verity and Carole in the dreams. Do they travel with us?”

“Uh, no, they’re from real life.” John dropped his eyes, and Rose waited while he mulled something over. “I uh…” John hesitated. “I was married… before, I mean.” Then he shook his head quickly. “It never came up. Verity was my wife and Carole, my daughter.”
“Okay,” Rose said softly. A hint of jealousy flared in her chest, but she sternly reminded herself that this was the past that the TARDIS had given him. “You’re under no obligation to me.” She lowered her eyes quickly, unsure of how to proceed. “I-I’m sorry, about whatever happened.”

“Car crash,” he answered. His tone was flat. “Verity was driving and lost control. She and Carole both tied in route to the hospital.”

“I’m so sorry.” Rose grimaced and twisted her hands together. Why had the TARDIS given him that kind of story? Couldn’t she have let him be a happy human for a few months? “I’m sorry that you have to live with that.”

“Thank you.”

Neither of them spoke, and John kept looking out the window. “Rose, I know that you said to talk with you once my term here was up, but you’re not under any obligation to wait.”

“I know.” Rose wondered if she’d answered too quickly. She wondered if she should hug him. She would have hugged the Doctor without hesitation, but she didn’t want to get attached to John Smith. So, she stayed across the room. “I know. I’m okay with how things are now. I’m reconnecting with old friends.” Forcing a smile when he looked at him, Rose shrugged. “I even caught up with my godson! He’s a student here. Nice kid.”

“I didn’t know you had a godson.” He looked surprised and a little pleased at the subject change. “Is he in any of my classes?”

“No, I don’t think so. He’s studying physics. Luke almost went to Cambridge, but he decided that he didn’t want to be that close to his grandparents. It started as a joke, but then he visited Oxford and really loved it.”

“You went to Cambridge, right?”

“I did.” Rose nodded. “His grandparents are Professors Ian and Barbara Chesterton. Nice people, but they can be a bit overbearing.”
She watched John Smith’s face for any sign of recognition. There was none. He seemed mildly interested, but there was a fog in his eyes that made Rose uneasy. Did he remember something? She was never sure. Guilt flooded her. There was a distance growing between them. They didn’t have many reasons to spend time together. That was her fault, and she knew it. Rose wanted the Doctor back even if she did like John Smith.

“Well, I’m glad you’ve had time to catch up with him.”

“Well, I’m glad you’ve had time to catch up with him.”

“Me too. I’m an only child so Luke and his sister sort of fill a younger sibling role in my life.” She smiled honestly now, and John smiled a bit in return. “I’ve never asked, do you have siblings?”

“No.” He blinked at the question and shook his head. “Just me and my parents. They were good folk, but they’re gone. Still, it was a good childhood. They let me run a bit wild in the fields near home.”

“So not a city boy?”

“Not at first. Grew up in the village of Hadfield near Manchester. We moved into the city when I was fourteen.” He shrugged, not seeming very interested in his own history.

“I never knew that.”

“Sorry, I don’t like talking about myself.”

“That’s okay.” Rose swallowed, trying to decide how to navigate this minefield. “Everyone has a past. It’s yours and doesn’t belong to me.” She struggled for the right words to comfort him. “The future is something we’ll talk about on another day.”

Professor Smith smiled at her, his eyes warm and soft. Rose knew that look and regretted the way her heart jumped. That was how the Doctor looked her in quiet moments when he thought she wasn’t aware of him. To have someone who looked just like him looking at her like that openly was a sweet sort of pain.

She was saved from staying too long by their respective classes. Guilt hung around Rose’s neck, heavy and centered on the watch she wore. During her next lecture, Rose pulled it out from under her shirt and cradled it in her hands, trying to banish the guilt and jealousy mingling in her stomach.
with little success. She took only a few notes for show, but it didn’t matter. Rose knew she wasn’t going to stay. No matter what happened, this wasn’t her life anymore.

A horrible thought hit her. What if something went wrong and the Doctor couldn’t come back? She tightened her hand around the watch and held her breath. She hadn’t used her telepathy at all while she’d been on Earth. It was still too new, and her shields were difficult to restore once she let them down. But now, in a class that she didn’t care about, Rose tentatively lowered them and looked down at the watch.

‘Rose.’ The Doctor’s voice was soft, but she was sure that she’d heard it. ‘Careful, Rose. Be careful. Protect yourself.’ Something gently touched her mind and Rose almost cried in relief. ‘I’ll be back,’ the Doctor’s mind promised. ‘But keep your shields up. The Family must not find you.’

The scolding was gentle. Rose wondered how much of her emotional state leaked to the Doctor. She wasn’t sure how aware his mind even was, and the very thought made her stomach turn. Before she could do something stupid, Rose tucked the watch back under the shirt and swallowed back the knot in her throat. She could still feel him even she rebuilt her fragile shields.

That had been stupid, Rose decided once she had control of herself. Shame, guilt, and grief tugged at her and Rose viciously stamped them down. The Family was on their way here. That ship could arrive at any moment, and she was having moments of weakness that might expose her and the watch. As class was let out, Rose didn’t even head to Professor Smith’s office to check in with him. After this morning and her brush with the Doctor’s mind, she wasn’t in any shape to confront the man who wore the Doctor’s face.

Deciding to skip the bus, Rose walked towards her flat. It wasn’t home. Her home was tucked away in a back room and anger over that simmered in her chest. Maybe this would have been easier in another time. Maybe she would have been able to be more guarded. It was too easy here. She was distracted from her angry musing by the ringing of her mobile. Rose sighed and adjusted her things so she could pull it out of her bag. All self-pity stopped when she saw that the caller was Spock.

“Spock, talk to me.”

“Rose,” Spock greeted. “The ship is coming down. I’ve been able to get some basic scans of the systems, but there are layers of defenses blocking more detailed biological scans.”

“Where is it landing?”
“I estimate a few miles outside of Oxford.”

“They were able to follow the TARDIS then,” Rose said. She sighed and rubbed her eyes, suddenly feeling very tired.

“Yes, I’m sorry.”

His sympathy helped a little. “Alert, UNIT. Send me the coordinates. I’ll steal Luke’s car.”

“Might I suggest informing Luke of the theft.”

“I will. I will.”

As it turned out, Rose did let Luke know that she was stealing his car. Not that she went inside his flat to get the keys or gave him time to agree. Rose knew her godson well enough to know that he’d want to come with her and that wasn’t going to happen. In truth, she was doing him a favor.

UNIT was already on site when Rose got there. They must have been tracking it right along with Spock. The rolling field was now covered in soldiers, mobile stations, and scanning equipment. No one got in Rose’s way once they saw her face. There was probably something there she needed to worry about, but she didn’t have the energy for that.

Rose was shown to the mobile unit where Kate was bossing around soldiers and scientists. She’d directed Rose’s attention to the wall of screens above the controls so she could see the ship. The outside was rough, but it had a vaguely sleek shape overall. She eyed the monitor carefully, memorizing what she could from the invisible craft and wondered if this containment plan was going to help at all.

“Try not to worry,” Kate said. She put her hand on Rose’s shoulder. “We have it surrounded and have control of the area.”
“Good.”

“So,” Kate said softly. “You think this is them?”

“I don’t know for sure,” Rose answered. “But be very careful opening it. The Doctor didn’t have time to tell me much about them, but he did say that they could look like anyone so they may be body copiers or even possess people.”

Kate nodded solemnly but sighed. “There are days that I hate this job.”

“I can tell you that they have limited lifespans,” Rose added. “Three months at most. It might be safer just to wait them out.”

“The problem is that we don’t know what kind of weapons they might have.”

“That’s… a very valid point.” Rose frowned at the image. “And it’s seriously invisible?”

“Yes.” Kate shook her head. “It opened when my men approached. They fell back when nothing came out and set up the perimeter. Given what you just told me, I’m grateful for that.”

“Me too.” Rose wasn’t sure what to do now. They could pick up the ship’s shape on the radar, but they didn’t have anything else to go on. And she remembered that the ship was fitted with a vortex manipulator which she really couldn’t let UNIT get their hands on. “Thoughts?”

“I’ve alerted HQ, and I’ll tell them about them being potential body snatchers.” Kate’s disdain was clear in how she said the last word. “We have some protocols for that, but without details about their ship there’s a limit to how much we can plan.”

“I see.”

“You should probably go,” Kate said. “Just in case. We don’t want them to see you and track you.”

“Fair enough.” Rose swallowed. Kate was right, but it felt wrong to turn her back on an enemy.
“One more question, how controlled was the landing?”

“Very,” Kate said. She nodded thoughtfully to Rose. “No crater. Barely any damage to the vegetation. I’m not sure why they didn’t go into the city.”

“I’m not sure I want to know the answer to that.”

Rose took a step back from the screens and did her best to ignore the curious looks being sent her way. There was nothing she could do here. It was best to let UNIT handle it. They were the professionals after all. Rose got a quick hug from Kate, promised to be careful, and returned to Luke’s car. If it took her an hour to start it and pull out of the area, that was her business. If she spent the night on the TARDIS control room floor in a pile of blankets and clutching the watch in her right hand, then that was her business too.
Rose woke to her phone ringing in her ear. She scrambled up and grabbed the phone before even remembering where she was. Around her, the TARDIS remained dim, but it gave Rose more than enough light to stagger towards the doorway as she answered the call.

“Tyler.”

“Rose, Kate.” Kate sounded out of breath and Rose tensed. “The Family opened fire on my troops and escaped isolation. You were right; they took over four of my men.”

“Are they back in the ship?” Rose asked.

“No,” Kate answered. They took off in the chaos. “I’ve ordered the ship moved. We’re going to try and keep them away from it and the weapons, but they might still be armed.”

“I see.” Rose locked the TARDIS and headed for the door. She hadn’t bothered to change out of her jeans last night and grateful for it.

“Rose, do you know any way to save my men?”

“I- I don’t know,” Rose admitted. “The TARDIS is on emergency power so I can’t access her database. Any chance that you got a scan on them for Spock?”
“No.”

“Okay.” Rose took a deep breath and rolled her shoulders. “Okay, if you can keep them from their ship then maybe we can set a trap for them.” Around her neck, she felt the weight of the watch shift and considered opening it. “I’ve got something they want too.”

“Then what?”

“I’ll borrow K-9 from Luke. He can scan them and hopefully give us a weakness. We trap and hold them. They won’t live very long.”

“And the Doctor?”

“Kate, I don't want to bring him back yet. If they get lucky and get him, then they’ll become immortal and ravage the galaxy if not the universe. Earth will be their first target.”

She could almost hear Kate’s doubts, but the other woman sighed. “Alright. I’m sending a car for you, Rose. Dad is coming in.”

“Alistair is?”

“He’s not willing to sit this one out.” Kate almost sounded happy about that. “He’ll be here once you are. Grab what you need. I’ll stay in contact with the driver.”

“Right. Thank you, Kate.” Rose paused and swallowed. “I’m very sorry about your men.”

“That’s not your fault.” Kate suddenly sounded exhausted. “We owed the Doctor our protection. Many times over, no matter what happens, this was in good faith.”

Had she been more balanced emotionally, Rose would have expressed her thanks again, but her mouth was dry. The call ended, and Rose closed her eyes for a moment. Then, when she opened them, she returned to her room and quickly changed and tied her hair in a braid. The Family of
Blood had gotten lose and had hosts. She turned on the local radio while she waited for news of her driver.

“A series of explosions last night outside of town have been declared meteorite strikes,” a solemn voice said. “Thankfully, there are no reports of casualties, and officials warn residents to be careful of anything unusual they find—”

Rose turned off the radio. She wasn’t sure if she was grateful or not that the Family had targeted the UNIT line. It had let them escape the ship, but Oxford hadn’t suffered. She paced in the small living room and wondered again if she should just bring the Doctor back. Rose didn’t. She left the watch alone around her neck. She couldn’t risk him, wouldn’t risk him.

When her phone beeped to let her know that the car was there, Rose headed downstairs. It had only been a few minutes. Kate had obviously anticipated Rose’s cooperation. As she climbed into the black SUV and nodded to the unfamiliar private who was driving, Rose considered texting Professor Smith. Normally she’d be at his office within the hour with tea and a morning check-in.

“Ma’am,” the private said. They pulled away. “Doctor Stewart said you needed to stop on our way there.”

“Yes,” Rose agreed. She gave him Luke’s address as she texted John that she was ill and wished him a good day. “Hopefully it will be a fast stop. Any news on the Family?”

“None so far.” The private sounded nervous and glanced around the street. “We know what the soldiers they took look like. They took two women and two men, but so far limited luck tracking them.”

“I’m surprised they left the ship,” Rose admitted. “Given that the military was around it.”

“None of us are sure what to make of it. Ma’am, do you know if they can switch bodies?”

“I don’t.” Rose hated to admit that, but she wasn’t sure. Obliviously they could long-term, but short term she had no idea if they had to wait for the bodies to burn out or if this was a one-time thing. “Hopefully what I pick up at our stop will help me figure that out.”

Rose bit her lip and tried to remember the first time the Family had attacked her and the Doctor.
She hadn’t seen them, and the Doctor had told her to run and not look back so they wouldn’t see her face. Had they been in other bodies then or not? Maybe they’d been in their native forms and decided that they stood out too much since the Doctor had seen them coming? Looking out the window, she once again wished that there had been more time to get information from the Doctor.

Shaking herself out of the dark thoughts as they approached Luke’s block, Rose slid towards the door. The SUV had barely stopped when Rose pushed open the door and stepped out. Luke was on the pavement talking with someone with a wide smile. Rose blinked at the stranger but was able to guess who he was quickly. Gordon Stewart looked a great deal like his grandfather. He had short dark hair and Alistair’s nose, but his eyes were a bit wider and green rather than brown. Luke turned towards Rose and grinned brightly.

“Rose, morning. This is Gordon.”


Her godson blinked at her in confusion, but he’d grown up in an odd enough family that he didn’t demand an explanation on the street. Instead, Luke nodded to her and gestured towards the door. It was Gordon who looked torn between amusement, amazement, and curiosity.


Rose thought about going herself, but there wasn’t much time. She nodded and let her godson rush back into the building.

“Is everything okay?” Gordon asked. His eyes were darting between Rose and the unmarked SUV. “That’s a UNIT driver.” Apparently the unmarked didn’t help so much.

“Not so much.” Rose sighed and then smiled a little. “Sorry to meet you like this, Gordon. I would have liked time to chat with you.”

“I’m a UNIT legacy,” Gordon said. “And you’re Rose Tyler. You’ve saved Earth solo, and you saved my little brother. I get that things get in the way of manners.”
“You should probably go.” Rose turned and surveyed the street. “Just in case.”

“Just in case what?”

Rose wasn’t paying attention to Gordon. Her eyes were scanning the nearby people. It was early, and there was a coffee shop across the street. People were crowding in to get their tea. Gordon was still watching her, and Rose held back a sigh.

“I’m glad you and Luke are friends,” Rose said.


“No, your mum would kill me.”

Luke came outside, carrying K-9 in his arms. He was a bit shaky on his feet, and Rose worried that he was going to fall. She started to move to help him, but then she saw them in the corner of her eyes. There were four of them, all walking together with strange little smiles on their face. Their UNIT uniforms were neat and tidy, but Rose instantly knew that something was wrong. They were all holding hands, and one of the female soldiers had a small skip to her movements as if trying to run and play. She knew the instant they spotted her because they all stopped and grinned. Around her neck, the watch burned against her skin.


“I see them,” Rose said. “Luke, stay back.” If she could leave without identifying her godson as a threat then- Luke opened the back door of the car and Rose nearly groaned out loud. “Curse your good manners.”

Beams of light shot past Rose. Her heart jumped with fear as she felt the heat from one of the plasma bolts against her skin. It didn’t hit her, but it was a near thing. Luke’s eyes widened, and Rose grabbed his arm. Pushing him into the back of the car, she did nothing when Gordon scrambled in beside him.

“Mistress Rose!” K-9 called.
She jumped into the car and shouted at the driver to go. They were moving before the door was even shut and Rose had to pull it shut before she fell out in the crowded back seat. Already Luke and Gordon were asking questions, but Rose ignored them in favor of listening to their driver radio in a report.

At least they weren’t on campus. At least the Family seemed to be paying attention to her. Rose could think of no other reason that they’d be in this area when she was. She tried to remember if the Doctor had said anything about them being able to smell the watch. He hadn’t, she was sure of that, and if he’d known they could, then he wouldn’t have bothered. So, either it was the watch or something else.

“Quiet down,” Rose ordered. The two young men fell silent. “There’s a lot happening. I’m sorry I pulled you into it. I didn’t want to.”

“What are they after?” Gordon asked. “Where’s the Doctor? I thought he was with you now?”

“Normally he is, and they’re after the Doctor,” Rose explained. Then she looked to the robot dog in Luke’s lap. “K-9 were you able to scan them?”

“Scan only 38% complete,” the dog reported. “Apologizes, Mistress Rose.”

“It’s okay.” Rose sighed and looked out the back. She didn’t seem them. “I just hope they don’t attack the civilians.”

“Units are being dispatched to watch them, ma’am,” their driver said. “We’ll do what we can to keep them contained.”

“Good. Sorry, I didn’t ask before, but what’s your name?”

“Hawkins, ma’am.” He nodded at her. “Pleasure to meet you. You’re something of a legend around UNIT.”

“Yeah.”
Rose tried not to let it bother her. The Doctor bore this issue with some dignity. Some, not a lot. Nodding, she turned in the seat to look out the back window. There was no sign of the four in UNIT uniforms, but Rose wasn’t at ease. They’d found her far more easily than she’d expected. Could they smell her? Or had they seen her at the crash site and recognized that she didn’t belong?


“They might try to take us as hostages,” Luke pointed out. He shifted in his seat and adjusted K-9. “Where are we going?”

“UNIT is working on a trap,” Rose answered. She looked around at the side streets. “You might be able to hide-”

“Do you know how they found you?” Gordon interrupted.

“I’m not sure,” Rose admitted. “But they escaped UNIT early this morning. They are dangerous.”

“Affirmative, Mistress Rose,” K-9 agreed. “I suggest against leaving Master Luke behind. UNIT forces will be a better defensive option.”

Luke started to smile but schooled his features when Rose sighed. Gordon looked torn between nervousness and excitement. Rose was already deeply regretting this, but it had already been a morning of things going wrong.

“Fine, K-9,” Rose said. “What did you get from them?”

“Unable to narrow down exact species, Mistress Rose, but preliminary scans indicate they are a gaseous telepathic life form.”

“Yeah, the Doctor said that they would die in three months if they didn’t have a host.” Rose looked out the back again. “So the question is, will a human host be enough to keep them alive or will they still die?” Her hand almost went to the watch. Maybe she could use her telepathy and ask the Doctor, but there was the risk of them detecting him too. “Any thoughts, K-9?”
“I cannot say with certainty at this time, Mistress Rose, but metabolisms of the human hosts were operating within standard species parameters.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?” Gordon asked. “They’re still human, right?”

“Negative,” K-9 answered. “No longer human. Alien entities are firmly in control of the brain and all bodily functions. Initial scan insufficient to determine life span.”

“So we don’t know if they’ll die after three months or if it’ll take the 50 years more of a human,” Luke said. “Or even longer.”

“They aren’t immortal,” Rose said. “That’s what they wanted the Doctor for.”

“So they will die,” Luke said. He nodded thoughtfully but had no additional insights to add.

Rose’s mind spun the whole way to the new UNIT site. The Doctor had wanted her to open the watch if the Family showed up, but that would put him in the firing line. Then again, UNIT had already potentially lost four men, and maybe the Doctor could save them. She didn’t know what to do.

They pulled into a small deserted industrial park outside the city. Rose looked around quickly at the various UNIT trucks and soldiers moving around. It was close enough that the Family would certainly find them, but hopefully isolated enough to keep anyone from getting hurt. Kate was walking across the pavement towards them as came to a stop. Rose opened the door and climbed out, gesturing for Gordon and Luke to follow.

“Kate, this is not my fault,” Rose said.

Gordon climbed out, and Kate’s eyes widened. “Mum, what is going on?” Gordon asked. “I ran into Rose and UNIT men attacked us and-”

Kate jumped forward to hug her son tightly. He went silent, and a faint blush appeared on his cheeks. Kate didn’t release him quickly. Alistair walked up behind her with a stern expression. It was still strange to see him young still. He was standing tall, shoulders back and dark brown hair comb perfectly. Alistair was dressed in his uniform, and Rose couldn’t help but notice that the men were staring at him in awe. That made Rose feel a little better.
“Grandfather,” Gordon greeted. “You okay?”

“I’m well, Gordon,” Alistair said. “You were the one shot at.” He looked at Rose with a hint of irritation.

“Sorry,” Rose said. “I tried to keep him out of it, but we have K-9 now, and hopefully he can tell us something about these aliens.” She paused and met Alistair’s dark eyes. “Thank you for helping me.”

“The Doctor’s one of ours.” Alistair didn’t wait to see her reaction and looked at Kate. “If they were able to find Rose and the car then they’ll find their way here quickly.”

“They’ll likely expect a trap,” Kate said.

“Yeah,” Rose agreed. She sighed and then shook her head. “Kate, send as many of your forces away as you can. The fewer people potentially caught in the crossfire, the better.”

“I’m not sure about that,” Alistair said. “We have their ship, but they likely have weapons.”

“Speaking of which,” Rose said. “Don’t let anyone go in the ship. I get that its tempting tech, but we don’t know what else might be in there.”

“I’ve kept it sealed,” Kate promised.

“Good.” Rose nodded and looked towards the gate nervously. “Good.”

Maybe the plan would work. With any luck, K-9 would find some way of helping the four poor souls that had been taken over, and they’d be able to keep them isolated until the Family died if they were lucky. Rose wasn’t feeling very lucky.
Hurry up and wait was Rose’s least favorite phrase. She hated situations that it fit even more. The weight of the watch was almost unbearable as she stood in a mobile unit tucked back behind the old factory amongst old junk and watched the hidden cameras. Rose wasn’t sure if the Family would spot them or not. Most of the soldiers had been sent away to nearby waiting points. The plan was to get a reading on the Family and go from there.

The ship was stored in the factory with explosives fixed to its side after K-9 assured Kate and Alistair that the ship did not contain harmful materials. In theory, if they got too close to the ship, Kate could destroy it. Rose was uneasy about that. Despite K-9’s assurances, she knew that the ship could travel in time and worried about the potential fallout from that. Of course, she was even more concerned about trying to make sure that UNIT didn’t get whatever time travel technology was in the ship. She adored Kate and Alistair, but… she knew enough about her species to worry.

She turned around to glance back into the small office at the back. Kate was lecturing Luke and Gordon. Rose felt a bit bad from them both. It was a bit hypocritical of her to try and keep younger people out of alien incidents given what she’d spent her university years doing, but Kate and Sarah Jane scared her a little.

“I hate the waiting,” Alistair said. He stepped up next to her with a cup of coffee. “Always have.”

“Me too,” Rose said. “I just want this over.”
“I imagine so.” Alistair looked down at her with a soft frown. “How are you coping, Rose?”

“It’s… I don’t like seeing him as a human,” Rose admitted. “He’s nice enough, but he’s not the Doctor, and I want him back.” She held in a sigh. “You know with regeneration how you can still always see the Doctor in the eyes?”

“I do indeed.”

“This is the opposite. I look for the Doctor, and that spark is missing.”

Alistair made a small sound of sympathy but said nothing. He touched her left shoulder and squeezed before dropping his hand back to his side. He didn’t need to say anything, and Rose felt a little less guilty about the situation knowing that Alistair understood at least a little. Her eyes checked the screens again, and she caught movement at the edge of one.

“Alistair.”

“I saw it.” An alarm on the controls flashed bright red. “And something just triggered the proximity alarms. Kate!”

“Yes, Dad?” Kate walked out with Gordon and Luke trying to follow. “Not you two!”


“I don’t need your mother trying to skin me alive; thank you.”

“Why is everyone so afraid of my Mum?” Luke asked. He sounded genuinely confused.

“I’ll explain later,” Rose said. “Kate, Alistair, this is your show. Where do you want me?”

“We need a report from K-9 first,” Alistair said. He reached for his radio. “All units, hold your positions.”
“I will attempt scan now, Mistress Rose,” K-9 said. He rolled out beside Luke and headed for the door. His master tried to follow him, but Kate grabbed Luke’s shoulder to hold him back.

“No,” Kate said firmly.


“You’re still technically a minor,” Kate reminded him. “You stay.”

“Luke, it’s fine,” Rose said. She followed after K-9. “I’ll stay with him. You need to be careful.” She looked to Gordon who was watching the proceeding with open curiosity. “And obey, Kate. These beings are brutal. The Doctor didn’t want to face them head on due to the damage they can do.”

There was a flicker of understanding and a hint of fear on Luke’s face now. It made Rose feel bad, but also made her feel better. He needed to take the Family seriously. Turning around, she nodded to Alistair and joined K-9 at the doorway. Rose opened it and knelt to pick up the dog. She crept outside and looked around. According to the cameras, the Family were around the corner, but she knew that caution was necessary. When she reached a section of pavement, Rose set K-9 down, and the metal dog rolled forward with his sensor extended.

“Why did they bring the ship here, Father of Mine?” a female voice added. Rose thought it sounded as if someone was speaking artificially highly.

“I think they hope to trap us, Daughter of Mine,” a male voice laughed. “Such foolish creatures.”

“Be cautious, Husband of Mine,” a second female voice said. “The memories indicate that this UNIT has fought off aliens before.”

“Yes, Mother of Mine,” a second male voice said. “But none like us.”

“Perhaps not,” Mother replied. “Still, they are almost amusing in their determination, Son of Mine.”
“The Time Lord is not here,” the son said.

Rose licked her lips and almost leaned around the corner to look at them. Her heart raced, and her eyes dropped to her bracelet. She didn’t know what they were capable of, not enough to be certain of success. K-9 hadn’t moved, but there was a soft whirling from him that she worried they might hear. Only the knowledge that more soldiers were waiting for K-9’s information kept her from being too scared.

“I smell something,” Father said. “Something fresh and flush with temporal energy.”

“But not the Time Lord,” Daughter said. “Where did he go? We could smell him from so far away, but now… not a hint.”

“He must be setting a trap,” Son said.

“The memories of this body are of no help,” the Father grumbled.

“You can switch once you have recovered, Husband of Mine,” the Mother said. “But do not exhaust yourself.”

Rose noted that with both relief and horror. She still didn’t understand what these things were; some kind of parasite was her best guess. They spoke about memories which could be very dangerous. Once again, she wished that the Doctor had given her more information. Then again, he had wanted her to bring him back if the Family showed up even if that put him into the line of fire.

“Let’s check the ship first, Husband of Mine,” the Mother said. “Then we can see what little trap these humans have set.”

All four of them laughed, arrogance all but radiating off of them. Rose finally poked her head around the corner beside K-9 and watched the Family of Blood as they slowly marched forward in a line, holding each other’s hands. Beside her, K-9 whirled softly, and she hoped that the metal dog would stay as quiet as possible. Too much could go long too quickly. They hadn’t had much time to set up this trap. She should have been preparing the moment the TARDIS dropped her and the Doct- John Smith off here. It was too late now, but that didn’t stop Rose from kicking herself.
“Scan complete,” K-9 said. His voice was soft as if he was whispering.

The Family hadn’t seemed to notice her yet. Rose knelt, keeping her eyes on them, and picked up K-9. She shifted him under her left arm. He was a bit heavy, but it kept her right hand free. Slowly, she backed up towards the mobile unit. The Family had stopped moving and were sniffing the air. Rose’s heart raced, and she was sure that they were about to detect her. The watch nearly burned against her skin. Picking up K-9, Rose moved quickly back to the main mobile unit as quietly as she could. Someone opened the door for her and Alistair ushered her inside.

“Well?” Alistair demanded.

“They are creepy.” Rose shuddered and put down K-9. “But K-9 got the scan.”

“The Family of Blood are a variation of the Protesian species,” K-9 announced. “Gaseous lifeforms that operate as parasites by taking over the body of a host. I regret to inform you that the mind of the host is quickly destroyed.”

“So we can’t save Privates Matthews, Higgins, Thompson, and Lawrence?” Kate asked. Her face was resigned, but a touch pale. “There’s nothing we can do?”

“Bio-electric brain patterns of hosts dissipate within one hour.”


“Yes, all knowledge and all memories,” Luke said. “But that doesn’t kill them.”

“No,” K-9 agreed. “After three hours, the Protesian gas has poisoned most internal organs. Critical failure would begin as soon as the host was free. Estimated duration of life is under three minutes.”

“They’re gone then,” Kate said. “Alright, can we shoot them? Will that be enough? We have enough men standing by or will they jump hosts?”

“Protesians cannot jump straight from host to host,” K-9 replied. “A period of roughly twelve hours is required before overlaying another body.”
“That’s why they didn’t make a move on your men right away,” Rose said. “The planet that they found the Doctor and I on… they must have had hosts and discarded them.” The idea made her sick.

“What about the bullets?” Alistair pressed. “Can they be killed like human given they are in a human form?”

“Firearms would damage the host and force Protesian to abandon the body,” K-9 answered. “However, the Protesian itself would still exist. Such an event would force it to try and take another host even in a weakened state.”

“So they have to have a host?” Kate confirmed.

“Affirmative. Absence of a host in an atmosphere such as Earth’s would dissipate the Protesian in roughly two hours.”

“Parasite indeed,” Alistair said darkly. “Anything else? Weapons or defenses?”

“Scans indicate they are carrying highly advanced energy weapons and an organic control interface.”

“Really?” Luke’s eyes widened. “What limitations does the organic control interface have?”


“They can’t control us with it right?” Luke asked.

“Negative, the control system only works on non-living organics. Ideally, the organics would be a moveable shape.”

“That’s all very interesting,” Kate said. “But if we can’t just destroy the hosts then how can we stop them. Is there a way to keep them from being able to take new hosts?”
“Protesian ability to jump hosts can be prevented by surrounding them with high-density gases such as argon or krypton. Even if trapped in hosts, they will expire within roughly two and a half months.”

Rose let out a sigh of relief and promptly felt guilt for it. Alistair nodded his understanding while Kate’s sorrow was clear on her face, she also appeared to have some relief.

“So, we trap them in argon,” Kate said. “We don’t have any site.” She was already moving to the computer. “But I can have some within the hour.”

“But how do we keep them occupied?” Alistair asked. He nodded towards the screens. “They aren’t moving towards the ship very quickly. They have to know that this is a trap or at least a distraction.”

“Can we help?” Gordon asked.

“No.” The answer came from Kate, Alistair and Rose all at once.

One of the techs at the monitors started to laugh while another’s shoulders shook from the effort of not laughing. The moment eased some of the tension, but Rose pulled out the watch and toyed with it nervously. She looked at the screens. The Family of Blood was right there.

“Argon containers will be here soon,” Kate said. “Within half an hour. At least we know that they won’t be able to jump bodies for a while, but what can we do to contain them in the short term. If we wait too long, we’ll hit the twelve-hour mark.”

“Ma’am!” A tech called. “They’re doing something.”

Everyone looked at the screens. The Family of Blood had released each other’s hands and had all pulled out weapons of some kind. A sudden burst of light was the only warning before one camera went down. Then another went down, and Rose grimaced.

“Well, they caught onto that,” she said.
“Blow the ship,” Kate ordered sternly. “Trigger the order and fall back.” Kate grabbed her phone and Alistair started barking orders for people to move. “If their hosts are destroyed they’ll need new ones so order everyone back until we have the argon gas!”

Around Rose, the whole mobile unit began to move as someone started driving them away. The rush of activity around her was barely noticed. The watch was hot in her hand, and her worry was returning with a vengeance. Suddenly everything shook. The explosives were going off. Rose hoped that the Family had been far enough away, but a nagging voice said that it was unlikely. Even a weak Protesian was far more dangerous than Rose wanted to deal with.

“I’m not sure this is going to be enough,” Rose said. She stepped up next to Kate. The signals were still going from two of the cameras. “This just doesn’t feel right.”

“No,” Kate said. “It doesn’t, but we’ve had worse, and K-9 gave us more information to go on than we usually get.”

The factory was collapsing as the brick walls crumbled. Smoke billowed up, and there were hints of flame, but there wasn’t much to burn. The only noise was the sound of the bricks hitting the ground and falling metal. Rose hoped it was the ship.

“Hopefully that dealt with the ship,” Alistair said. “The last thing we needed was them to get back to the weapon systems.”

“Yes,” Kate exhaled. She leaned closer to the screens. “Send a message to HQ to cover the explosion. We don’t want anyone stumbling in.”

“What now, Mum?” Gordon asked.

“When we stop, I’m putting you and Luke into transport to a safe house.”

“You don’t have to,” Luke protested. “We can help.”

“You will not, and don’t even think of going outside,” Kate snapped. “Very likely in keeping them from the ship, we now have at least one of the hostiles in its gas form in need of a host! You will
stay safe and away from the threat.”

“Kate’s right,” Rose said. “The Family worried even the Doctor. He wanted just to wait them out. This is a containment mission, Luke.”

“What scared him about them?” Gordon asked. He was thankfully looking nervous now.

“Their pattern of behavior is very violent,” K-9 answered. “Protesians are largely extinct due to the devastating effect they have on any beings they encounter.”

“They run through bodies faster than a population can produce them,” Kate said with a nod. “That fits.”

“Additionally, as the name suggests, suffer from a powerful bloodlust,” K-9 added. “They are very aggressive to any beings not within their family unit and prior to mass hunting of them destroyed multiple civilians for their own pleasure.”

The watch burned hot against Rose’s neck. They kept moving away from the factor, and on the communications map, she could see that they were nearing the outer line where the soldiers were spreading out. But then, one of the screens still connected to a working camera, she saw three figures stumble out of the flames of the factory and thought she saw a flicker of green in the air above them.
Rose couldn’t focus on the mess of noise around her. Reports were being relayed to Kate and Alistair, and the technicians were trying to adjust the cameras as much as they could. They’d lost over half of them and all of the sensors around the ship in the explosion. But the Family was leaving the burning wreckage rather than trying to head in for the ship. Rose hoped that was a good sign. Hopefully, UNIT’s explosives had destroyed the ship completely. Unfortunately, it now meant that as far as the Family knew, they had no more reason to stay in this area. Surely, they had to know that there were more soldiers nearby.

The Family were all staying close together around their gaseous member. One of the females was gone, but Rose wasn’t sure if it was the Mother or the Daughter that the explosion had dealt with. The smiles on their faces were gone, replaced with narrow, tight frowns. Then the three remaining members of the Family of Blood lifted their weapons and opened fire. Soldiers ducked for cover, leaning out to fire wide shots intended to keep the Family of Blood back. Rose looked to Kate who was talking into her phone with someone about the Argon gas and trucks. It was a rapid-fire exchange. Next to her, Alistair had a radio and was giving orders to the soldiers in the field.

Her chest was tight from worry. K-9’s information about the Protesians had helped, but she’d been hoping for a quick solution that they didn’t have to wait for. As it was, if they jumped again, then they’d be on a time crunch to maybe save them. Rose hated this. Her hand went to the watch, and she once again considered restoring the Doctor.

It was tempting. A car could be sent to collect him, and he could be briefed quickly about what was going on. But... but then if something went wrong and the Family of Blood got him, then this
would all be for nothing. The poor souls killed by the Family would just be the first victims. Rose could hear the Doctor’s whispers. He wasn’t telling her to release him; he was warning her to be careful. She’d take that as agreement and let go of the watch.


“We need to evacuate you two,” Kate replied. “One of them needs a new host, and I’m not risking you.”

“Mum, are you sure that you’ll be okay?” Gordon pressed. “I mean-”

“We have containment units and the gas on the way,” Alistair said. “Along with protective suits. They’ll be here soon.”

“But they aren’t here now.” Gordon looked at the screen. “Mum, I don’t want to-”

“Gordon, this is my job, and I will be fine.” Kate gave her son a soft, reassuring smile. “I’ll have a car take you home, and you can help watch James. I’d feel better knowing you were there.”

Gordon’s face was hard to read as he shifted into parade rest. Given that he’d never been in the military, Rose could only assume that he’d learned it from his grandfather. A stubborn expression appeared, and Rose braced herself for a fight. She could already see Luke’s shoulders shifting into a tense and ready to battle stance. They were both too much like their mothers for their own good.

Suddenly the vehicle lurched. Rose grabbed onto the edge of a monitor to try and stay upright. Alistair huffed as he was thrown against the far wall and Kate barely grabbed the back of a tech’s chair. They skidded to a stop, and everything was silent.

“I think they hit us,” Alistair said. He pulled out his sidearm and marched to the exit door, standing guard as Kate rushed to the front of the unit. “Be ready.”

Rose spun back to the monitors. Sure enough, the Family were heading for them, still firing their weapons towards the lines of soldiers tucked behind barriers. The glee was beginning to return, and Rose wasn’t sure if that was a good or bad thing. The greenish mist was still floating behind them.
“K-9, you said it would take two hours for it to die in Earth’s atmosphere.”

“Affirmative. It is likely that it will seek another host despite the toll that a rapid overlay will take.”

“Unfortunately, I agreed with you,” Rose said.

“Dad,” Kate called. “They hit the motor. We’re just sitting here.” She touched the boys on the shoulders. “Come on; we need to crawl out through the front. Everyone out. We need to keep falling back while we can.” Kate’s voice was calm and controlled, but Rose detected the sharp note of worry. She didn’t blame Kate. Her oldest son was in the line of fire. “Gordon, come with me.”

“I’ll cover the back,” Alistair said. He nodded to his daughter but kept his eyes on the door. “Rose, where are they?”

The Family was drawing close, but there was no urgency to their actions. “Getting close,” she answered. “They don’t seem worried.”

“Mistress Rose, please leave the area,” K-9 said. He rolled over to Alistair. “Sir should depart as well. I will cover the escape.” Alistair looked down at the dog with a hint of confusion. “I am equipped with a phaser weapon,” K-9 added. “And I cannot serve as a host. You can.”

“But—” Luke started to protest only to fall silent. “Be careful, K-9.”

Guilt roared in Rose’s chest, but this was the smartest move they could make. But it still hurt like hell to leave the loyal dog behind to cover their escape. Alistair moved closer to her and touched her arm. His dark eyes met Rose’s, and she knew that he understood. Nodding, Rose headed after Kate towards the front. There was a small door that separated the mobile command unit from the cab of the truck. It was easy for Rose to forget sometimes that despite all the technology crammed into the back, it was essentially a camper. She crawled over the front passenger seat to the passenger door. A man in uniform was waiting and quickly helped her down.

Kate was on her radio a few feet away while also gesturing Luke and Gordon towards a jeep waiting a few feet away. There were dozens of people in sight now, and Rose glanced back. She could hear the Family getting closer as they laughed. Alistair jumped down beside and took her arm, firmly leading her away from the mobile unit. Behind them, Rose heard K-9’s beam weapon
discharge and flinched.

“Keep moving,” Alistair said firmly.

Then things went wrong. A stray green beam from one of the Family’s weapons hit one of the old powerlines leading towards the factory. There was the sound of twisting metal. People scattered. Alistair pulled Rose back sharply just before the mass of metal crashed down in front of them. Alistair twisted around, shielding Rose before she could stop him. A shout of alarm from Kate and Luke echoed in Rose’s ears, and she heard laughing.

Ears ringing, Rose blinked several times to clear her vision. The metal ahead of her was sparking with downed lines. Kate was on the far side, keeping Luke back while Gordon was pulled back by another soldier.

“Dad!” Kate shouted.

“Keep moving!” Alistair ordered. “We’ll go around!”

“Mind the downed cables!”

Another blast behind them made Rose flinch. The mobile unit started to tip before shifting back on its wheels. Kate and the boys piled into a jeep and drove off towards the west. Alistair and Rose started jogging. The lines were sprawled around them, still sparking, and the mass of metal was twisted into vicious looking shapes.

They had no choice, but to creep around the mobile unit. The shots had quieted a bit, and Rose didn’t want to guess what the meant for K-9. She and Alistair didn’t speak but shared a look as they moved around the back of the mobile unit.

“What an interesting little machine,” one of the male Family members said.

“Oh, Father of Mine, don’t hurt it,” the remaining female said. She giggled in a high pitched voice. “Just think, I could have a puppy.”
“Don’t get attached, Daughter of Mine. The machine is dangerous.”

“It could be reprogrammed easily enough, Father of Mine,” the Son said. It was smiling at his sister, almost gently. “And it is a machine. We could fix it when needed and not have to worry about Sister of Mine losing a pet.”

Shockingly, the Father seemed to be considering it. Rose blinked at them, stunned and distressed by the almost normal family interaction. Still… they had killed people and had no problems attacking the innocent in their quest for immortality. She had to remember that for the Doctor’s sake. And at the present moment for her own sake and the sake of all the UNIT personnel who were scattered around.

“We’re too exposed,” Alistair whispered. He was looking around. “We need to work around.”

Rose frowned and looked around. The power line structure had been at least fifteen feet tall. The power was still on so they couldn’t climb over it without being electrocuted. It was bad luck. Or maybe the Family had realized they were escaping that way. She watched the jeep in the distance and breathed a little easier. Alistair pulled on her hand, and they slowly moved away from the mobile unit. From this angle, Rose could see the Family. Hopefully, they couldn’t see them. There was another vehicle moving towards them from across the complex. Her nose filled with smoke from the still burning factory and Rose feared she’d start coughing.

They reached a cement barricade and ducked out of view. Rose’s heart was pounding, and they hadn’t even been running. Alistair poked his head around the side for a split second before leaning against the barricade.

“Blasted.”

“We’re almost to the jeep,” Rose said softly. She shifted her right hand, ready to summon her sword.

“This has all gone wrong.”

“We couldn’t make much a plan since we didn’t know about them,” Rose whispered.

She wanted to look around the barricade to see what had happened to K-9 but didn’t dare. Then she
heard footfalls.

“I’ll take good care of my doggy, Father of Mine.”

“We need to reprogram it,” the Father said darkly. “And you are not to repair the weapon.”

“Oh, but Father of Mine, I rather like the idea of Sister of Mine having a properly armed guard dog.”

“It will be discussed with Wife of Mine.” They stopped moving. They had to be only a few feet away.

“Release me,” K-9 demanded. Rose’s eyes closed in relief.

“No,” the Daughter said. “You’re my doggy now. Not to worry, Brother of Mine will reprogram you. You’ll be Doggy of Mine.”

Alistair shared a look with her. The Family were close. Rose could almost smell them. Their hiding place wasn’t much help. The jeep was nearby, and a soldier was leaning out the window with his weapon. Even from here, Rose could see how scared the man was. She and Alistair must have been a sight. Ducked behind a cement barricade, hiding from three humanoid figures and a green cloud.

“Keep it quiet, Daughter of Mine,” the Father said. “I understand that you want to keep it, but our immortality remains the most pressing issue.”

“The scent is muddled,” the Son said. “These people have been exposed a great deal to the Time Lord.”

“A pity we weren’t aware of that,” the Daughter said. “We could have set a trap here. But then, it wouldn’t have been as much fun.”

“No,” the Father said. “We have only a little time, and the Doctor never lingers. We might not have caught him.” There was a loud sniffing, and Rose eyed the jeep. She was considering just making a
run for it. “I thought I smelled the Time Lord,” the Father said. He sniffed the air loudly, tilting his head up while the children did the same. “No, not the Time Lord, but something else.”

“That pretty blonde lady,” the Daughter said. “She smells like Time.”

Rose held her breath. That explained a lot. Too much in fact and she looked around, trying to figure a way out of this situation. Maybe she should just run for it. Alistair touched her arm and nodded to her. They both started to shift slowly.

“Yes,” the Son agreed. “Strange creature. Smells not just of Time, but more.”

“Much more,” the Daughter echoed. “Pleasant and scary all at once. A predator like us, but not. A Big Bad Wolf.”

Rose barely kept in her gasp. But the words helped drive away some of her fear. Around her neck, the watch was heavy, but she didn’t reach for it. They were too close right now. Then Alistair stood. Rose followed, and they ran. Shouts behind them came from the Family. Rose kept an eye on Alistair. He might be younger again now, but he wasn’t the expert on running that she was. Glancing over her shoulder, she noted with alarm that the Family were raising their weapons, but hesitation was on their faces. The green mist was moving.

“Rose!”

The frightened shout was the only warning that Rose got. The green mist crashed towards her. There was a faint echoing laugh in the air that might have only been in Rose’s head. She summoned her sword and swung at the green mist as she backed away. It was moving too fast to run, and Rose recognized that much. A brief, panicked thought told her to open the watch or throw it to Alistair, but it was too late.
Rose had expected it to be immediate. To just lose herself as the green mist wrapped around her and seeped into her body. But it wasn’t like that at all. She was suddenly super aware of her body. It was like being shocked but stretched out over several long minutes. The pain was minor, but it traveled all across Rose’s body as the thing forced itself inside. Sharp pain radiating down her spine as panic consumed her. This wasn’t how she was supposed to die. She wasn’t supposed to die at all. Rose knew some of her future children. No, if this was- Jack would be here. He wouldn’t let her die like this. Her thoughts were becoming difficult. Maybe Jack couldn’t come because of his own weird immortality. The Protesian pushed deeper, trying to burrow itself into her mind.

The ship was gone. They’d be stuck on Earth, at least for a little while, but Rose didn’t sense anger over that. No, it was a challenge to them. Images flashed across her consciousness, but she didn’t let them sink in. Pushing all of her focus into her shields, Rose could have sobbed in relief when they helped keep the creature out of her mind. She suddenly realized that this was why they hadn’t just possessed the Doctor. Parasite or not, they had limited, and she had no doubt that the Doctor’s mind would utterly crush them. That thought made her a little happy.

It pushed at her, trying to break here. Rose exhaled slowly and closed her eyes. That was probably dangerous, but it let her shore up the defenses. It was clawing and tearing, trying to get control. The odd shock like sensation was lingering and running up and down her arms. Given what K-9 had said about it overpowering her own bio-electrical signals, she could guess what it was trying to do. The pushes became weaker, and Rose almost smiled. It was weak; still, it hadn’t had enough time to fully recover from taking the prior host, and she was telepathic. She could win this. She could hold it back. Rose inhaled slowly and let her walls build up further and grow stronger. The lingering pain stayed, but the images from the Family member’s mind grew weaker.

“Rose?” Alistair called. He had his firearm trained on her but kept glancing at the Family behind her.
Around her wrist, Rose felt the bracelet pulse, but it didn’t fall off. The Daughter was grinning at her with relieved eyes. The body she was in control of was older than Rose with long black hair tied back in a bun. It was an extreme contrast to the way that the Daughter all but skipped over to her. She held out K-9 with a happy look.

“Look what I’ve got, Mother of Mine.”

It was clawing at her. There was a howl in her head. Rose wasn’t sure if it was the Mother or the Bad Wolf. She hoped the later. Maybe her mysterious message would make itself useful today, or the old defenses that the Eleventh Doctor put in her head would be enough to keep the Mother at bay. The Family hadn’t noticed that it wasn’t the Mother yet, but a strange expression was starting to take over Father’s face. Reaching out, she touched K-9 as the dog’s sensors whirled. It would be smarter to leave now while she could, but K-9 was her best option.

“Mistress?” K-9 asked.

“No, silly doggy,” the Daughter said. “This is Mother of Mine.”

Rose took the robot dog from the Daughter and forced a smile. The Daughter reached to take K-9 back with a pout. “A dog?”

“Wife of Mine?” the Father asked.

Rose took a step back and turned towards Alistair, still holding the heavy robot dog. The Daughter made an unhappy noise and stamped her foot. “Mother of Mine! I want to hold the puppy!”

“Rose?” Alistair called. His weapon was pointed at her.

Rose wasn’t sure how much time they had and took a few steps towards him. Behind her, the Son chuckled darkly.

“What are you going to do to him, Mother of Mine?” the Son asked.

“Run!” Rose hissed.
Alistair must have seen something in her eyes because he nodded and they raced for the jeep. It was difficult with K-9’s weight in her arms, but fear and the clawing screaming in her head drove her forward.

“Wife of Mine?” A confused voice behind her called.

“Mother of Mine?” The son yelled, his voice becoming frantic.

Rose didn’t answer them. Running from them was surely answer enough. The jeep was right there, and they clamored in before the Family regained their wits enough to start firing again. As it was, the three stood there staring in stunned silence. The Son started to lift his weapon, but the Father shook his head, eyes locked on Rose. Something like pleasure filled Rose’s chest, a smug satisfaction, but she quickly pushed it down. The Mother was still rattling around in her head.

“Rose, are you alright?” Alistair asked.

“Sir, Stewart is ordering us back,” their young driver said. He was gripping the wheel nervously. “Counter orders?”

“I’m okay for now,” Rose said. She gestured to her head. “It’s in here, but not in control.” Rose shivered at the words and exhaled slowly. “I need to talk to K-9.”

“You’re holding it?”

“Slightly telepathic,” Rose said. She did her best not to think about the watch, not wanting to risk giving the Mother any information. “And the Doctor’s been teaching me to shield. I think that’s what protecting me, but…” She trailed off, unsure of how to tell Alistair that she wouldn’t be able to hold out forever.

“Alright then.” Alistair nodded and looked back at the Family. “They seem startled.”

“Yeah,” Rose said. “Maybe its something we can use. They’re not going to want to hurt me. The Mother having to jump hosts again wouldn’t be good. We were already in the window that it was weak which is probably helping.” She inhaled slowly and tried to strengthen the wall in her mind.
“Let’s hope the rest of the equipment is here soon.”

The Jeep rumbled along, weaving to avoid any fire that the Family might lay down, but their opponents were strangely silent behind them. Rose didn’t trust it, but she suspected that her lack of cooperation as the Mother was confusing them. Alistair put a hand on her shoulder, keeping a solid weight on her body to help ground her. It helped, but his hand was also too close to the watch for Rose’s comfort. Then again…

Rose reached up and quickly unclipped the short chain that had become the watch’s home. Alistair made a small sound of confusion but didn’t try to stop her. The Doctor’s mind was silent and still. There were no whispers. Rose wasn’t sure what to make of that, but if she couldn’t hear him then hopefully Mother couldn’t.

“Hold onto this for me.” Rose handed it to Alistair. He frowned and studied her, but nodded. He slipped it into his pocket. “Very handsome.”

“Yeah, I’m fond of it.”

“Mistress, is that—”

“It’s nothing, K-9,” Rose said firmly. “How are you?”

“My defense system is damaged, but my sensors and databanks remain intact.”

Maybe Alistair knew what the watch held, maybe he didn’t, but at least he wasn’t drawing attention to it. Panic filled Rose’s chest at the absence of the watch, but it was for the best. If the Mother won then at least… Rose shuddered. Her whole body quivered, and her throat tightened. Alistair’s grip of her shifted off her shoulder, and he gently rubbed her back as the jeep came to a stop.

A barricade was set up by a small empty industrial building. Soldiers were kneeling behind it with their weapons trained on the distant figures of the Family. More such defense points were set up all around the factory. Rose just hoped that it would be enough. Things had already gone more than a little sideways. The urge to use a few of the Doctor’s more choice alien curse words was very strong.

Her hand went to the watch around her neck only to find empty air. Alistair put his hand on her shoulder once again, and she almost cried in relief. Shaking her head, she gestured for Luke to stay back. Her godson stopped and frowned at her, his eyes expressing his unhappiness.

“Luke… just be careful around me,” Rose cautioned.

“Protesian attempted to take over Mistress Rose,” K-9 explained.

“It’s still me,” Rose said. She grimaced in pain. “But it’s trying to take over.”

“How?” Kate gaped at her, eyes wide with fear and confusion. She glanced at her father nervously and stayed firmly in front of her son. “How are you still-”

“I’m slightly telepathic,” Rose managed. “That might be why, but there isn’t time. It’s fighting me.”

Alistair took her in with sharp brown eyes and nodded in understanding. Then he looked down at K-9. “If it doesn’t have control then can we stop it?”

“Affirmative,” K-9 answered. Rose had never heard anything so beautiful. Sighs of relief escaped everyone, but Rose didn’t let herself get too excited too quickly. “It is likely to be painful, Mistress Rose.”

“Fine,” Rose hissed. The Mother twisted in her body, sending electrical shocks down her spine. “It’s painful right now.”

“We probably don’t have much time,” Luke said. He dropped down beside K-9 and started talking with the dog about electrical signals. It didn’t sound pleasant to Rose.

“Rose,” Alistair said. “I hate to say this, but I think you shouldn’t be a part of the planning.” His gaze was firm, and his expression closed off. “Let Luke and the medical team focus on keeping you from being taken over. Let UNIT handle the aliens.”
“But-”

“If you know the plan and the creature wins your mental fight then it’ll know the plan.”

“You’re right.” Rose’s shoulders slumped in defeat. She tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “You’re right, Alistair. Just-just please be careful.”

“I will be; I’m not losing more people.” Then he leaned forward and kissed her forehead gently. It was a startling display of affection. “You take care of yourself. I’ll not have the Doctor mad at me because I didn’t protect you.”

“That’s not your job.”

“He’s my best friend, and you’re-” Alistair cut himself off. “Yes, it is my job.”

It was hard watching Kate, Alistair, and a newly arrived colonel huddle up. Rose quickly turned away from them, lest she be tempted and headed over to where more jeeps were pulling up. A dark mood settled over her. She wondered how things had gone so wrong so fast. Maybe it would have been better to- she put a stop to the thought at once when the Mother shifted in her head. A shiver raced down Rose’s spine.

“We’ve got a plan,” Luke said. “I’ll go set up.” He gestured to the medical unit that was being parked. “Just try to relax.”

“Relax,” Rose repeated. “Right.”

Rose found Alistair still talking with Kate. Trucks were rolling up and opened. She caught sight of canisters of compressed gas in the back of them. In her head, the Mother pushed against her shields. They held against the assault, but Rose felt weaker in her next breath. Then Mickey climbed out of one of the jeeps, and Rose’s shields got a little bit stronger.

Mickey looked smart and sharp in his uniform, and Rose smiled as she noted the privates deferring to him. He caught sight of her and strode over, wrapping her in a hug before Rose could protest. His warm body relaxed her, and Rose found herself clutching his shoulders. Tears tried to well up
in her eyes, but somehow she kept them at bay.

“Hello, gorgeous,” Mickey greeted softly.

“Hey, Mickey.” Her friend kissed her forehead gently and rocked her. “Good to see you.”

“What trouble are you in now?”

“I’ve got an alien in my head,” Rose said softly. She sniffed as tears tried to take over. “Keeps clawing at my mental shields.”

“Thank God the Doctor started teaching you to control your telepathy,” Mickey said. “Sharon and Shireen are on their way up. They’re going to want to check you over.”

“This just keeps becoming a more and more crowded mess.” Rose shook her head but didn’t move away from Mickey. “Why did it have to go so wrong? The plan was to lay low and wait from them to die. Keep them busy looking so they wouldn’t do any damage.”

“Hey, their ship is destroyed,” Mickey said gently. “And it sounds like there is a plan forming.”

“I’m not allowed to be a part of it,” Rose said. “Just in case it wins.”

“It’s not going to win.” Mickey sounded confident. “But as your friend, I’m glad that they want to deal with the alien in your head first. That’s most important.”

“Don’t let me hurt anyone,” Rose whispered. Mickey tensed. “Promise me, you won’t let me hurt anyone.”

“You aren’t going to hurt anyone.”

Rose hissed at another attack on her shields. Her knees quivered, and if it hadn’t been for Mickey, she probably would have dropped to the ground right there. His arm lowered to her waist, keeping her stable and he pulled back to look at her face.
“Rose, you’re sweating, really badly.” Alarm was filling his eyes. “Come on, let’s go to medical. They’re getting set up for you.” Behind her back, he was gesturing to someone. “Just keep your shields up. Think Star Trek while the Romulans are attacking.”

“You are such a nerd.”

“I’ll remind you that you’re the one who first made me watch Star Trek. I was fine with only seeing Star Wars, but that wasn’t good enough for you.”

Mickey was gently steering her towards the medical unit, Rose realized with surprise. She hadn’t even been aware that her feet were moving. The steps were slow, but they were definitely moving, and other soldiers were moving out of their way. Rose swayed, and Mickey tightened his grip on her, turning her and guiding her with a bit more force.

“I feel drunk,” Rose whispered. Her stomach started to turn. “And like I’m going to throw up. It’s like that night that the girls and I burned my wedding dress.”

“Great.” Mickey sped them up a little. “Just keep your shields up. K-9 and Luke will help.”

“Rose!”

She knew that voice. Rose looked towards the west and found Sharon rushing towards her. Shireen was right behind her. A smile started to take over her face, but a sharp pain in her head made Rose hiss in alarm.

“Whatever you’re going to do,” Mickey snapped, “do it fast!”

“Luke called us on the way up,” Shireen said. “Rose, we’re here, and K-9 has all the information we need. Doctor Burrows is in the medical unit. You just need to get there.”

Rose nodded, but her legs suddenly gave out. Mickey caught her and before she could protest, swept her up in his arms. Her stomach threatened her with disaster and her vision blurred, but she had no control as Mickey rushed her towards the medical unit.
Discretion: I do not own Doctor Who or any of the spinoff material and I gain no income off of this story, just the satisfaction of playing with the characters.

Rose struggled to stay aware. She was laid out on the examination table except that there was a machine that didn't look quite right next to it. Luke had the thing open, and K-9 was up on a counter beside him. Rose’s ears were ringing now, and she could barely hear. The Mother’s voice was starting to seep in. It was mocking her and promising pain. There was a sharp pain as the Mother tried to access her recent memories. Rose kept her defenses up as much as she could. Not having to stand was helping, but it was draining.

“He never said it was like this,” Rose slurred.

“Who, honey?” Shireen asked gently. She was holding Rose’s hand while Sharon did something just outside of her view.

“The Doctor,” Rose groaned. “Never said that keeping my mind safe would feel this bad.”

“It’s probably the fault of what you’re keeping yourself safe from,” Shireen said very reasonably. “But keep fighting. We’re going to take care of you. We’re not going to let the Mother take you.”

“What about the others?” Rose demanded.

“They’re working on it,” Mickey said. He was standing by the door, watching her with a worried frown. “Try not to worry. K-9 gave them a lot of information. We know their weaknesses.”

He took her hand and squeezed it gently. Rose grabbed on tight. Tears gathered in her eyes, and she
slammed them closed, trying to hide her fear. The pain was building behind her eyes. The Doctor had always been careful during their lessons, mindful of the weight of his mind when compared to hers, but the Mother didn’t care. She was ramming against Rose’s shields with the frantic attacks of something that knew that they were going to die.

“Rose, we’re here,” Luke said. He touched her arm, and she could hear the worry and determination in his voice. He sounded so much like his mother. “We’re ready when you are.”


“I’m not leaving you.”

“Luke, step back.” Sharon’s voice was firm, and Rose heard movement. Something cool and small was pressed against her head. Then another one and another. “Rose, just stay calm. Try to control your breathing. Hopefully, this won’t hurt.”

“Let me guess, electrical shocks,” Rose muttered.

“Something like that,” Shireen said across the room. “Focus on your shields. Do everything you can to keep the Mother out.”

Rose regretted giving Alistair the watch. Her neck was empty without the weight. Just holding it and feeling the Doctor’s mind would have helped. Mickey’s grip was firm. A feminine hand took her other hand. Probably Sharon or Shireen. Inhaling slowly, Rose tried to relax her body. It was difficult; the pain was growing with each passing moment. Suddenly, a sharp jolt of pain rattled her jaw and made her hiss. Something shifted in her head. Rose wasn’t sure if that was good or not. A hiss of pain escaped her. She tried to pull away, but the comforting hands suddenly were holding her in place. Someone grabbed her shoulders to keep her pressed down. More hands were on her legs as she started to kick.


“I know, honey,” Mickey said.

“The Family-”
“Let the Stewarts handle it,” Shireen said firmly. Her tone left no room for argument.

“But, I—”

“Rose.” It was Sharon right next to her. Rose forced open her eyes. When had she closed them? Her friend was leaning over her, a frown marring her features and her eyes burning intently. “Rose, the TARDIS brought you to this time. Of all the time periods and planets she could have chosen, she brought you to your friends. Let your friends help you. Let UNIT protect the Doctor. She brought you to us for a reason.”

Stunned, Rose stared at her friend. People were moving in the small medical unit, but Sharon and Mickey were beside her. Her eyes jumped over to Luke, K-9, and Shireen who were studying what Rose was pretty sure was an image of her brain. They were here. It was hard to breathe. The grip of Mickey’s hand became stronger.

“We’re here,” Mickey whispered. “We’re here.”

Nodding, Rose struggled to keep breathing. Another shock rippled along her side, and she twitched. She dropped her head back and closed her eyes tightly. The pounding against her shields was getting impossibly worse. Whatever plan K-9 and Luke had, she hoped that it worked fast.

………………

Alistair stared out at the Family through his binoculars and resisted the urge to curse. It was strange being back in the thick of things. He’d been trying to stay at least semi-retired, but having a younger body again had made that difficult. At least he hadn’t had many normal friends that he’d needed to cut contact with. Boredom came more easily when you were young and had the ability to do things. UNIT had been more than happy to call him back in beyond training sessions and lectures. At first, he’d been concerned about Kate, but she didn’t mind him around at all. It was a surprise. A pleasant surprise, but a surprise none the less.

“They’re just standing them,” Alistair muttered. “Watching us, but not making a move.”

“The soldiers are setting up the perimeter. We have the gas,” Kate said. “And the cages will be here any moment.”
“I hope they are as strong as you think.”

“They’ll hold up,” Kate said firmly. “I confirmed the strength with K-9 and Spock.”

“Ah, did the computer have anything to add?”

“Technically the computer is only the interface,” Kate corrected. There was a hint of amusement in her voice. “Spock is a Xylok. He didn’t have any additional information. They are a rare species due to their aggression and short lifespans. Apparently, these four even managing to leave their planet is something of an achievement.”

“One I could do without.” Alistair glared at the Family as anger welled up inside of him. “Hunting the Doctor, really?”

“He’s made himself human according to Rose so he must have been worried.”

“At least he came to our time,” Alistair said. He was sharply aware of the watch in his pocket. He didn’t understand it, but Rose’s desire to hand it off when the Mother jumped into her certainly hinted at its importance. “I would have preferred him coming straight to us. We could have put him up as a scientist and kept him safe.”

“You know that he needs some distance nowadays.” Kate’s tone was firm with an undercurrent of pity. Alistair didn’t like the idea of anyone pitying his old friend. Sympathy was fine, but the Doctor would chafe under pity. “He hates the firearms and military titles now.”

“Yes, I know. Doesn’t mean that this blasted situation doesn’t worry me. It’s been difficult on Rose.”

“She’ll be alright. We know that. You’ve met-”

“Time can change, Kate. Me meeting a young Time Lord named after me doesn’t guarantee anything. And their children can’t come to help because that would just put them at risk and give the Family more targets.” Alistair huffed and glared out at the unmov ing figures. “The sooner we surround that lot in gas and get them into the cages, the happier I’ll be.”
“As well I.”

“Any update on Rose?”

“They’re working on some kind of electrical shock system.” Kate shivered but didn’t flinch. “Their goal is to disrupt the electrical signals of the parasite. The impression I got is that doing so will kill it.”

“Let’s hope so. Have you sent anyone to Cambridge?”

“Just two men, Ross and Higgins. I was going to send Smith as well, but he’s needed here.” Kate glanced his way. “Plainclothes only. I don’t want to draw attention to him.”

Alistair nodded in agreement. His daughter was right. While this all would have been easier if the Doctor had just come to them, he supposed that this wasn’t the worst result. He felt for the four people they’d lost thus far, but Rose’s fear and the very action that the Doctor had taken spoke to the very real danger of the Family.

“I wish they’d move,” he grumbled.

“They’re likely waiting for the fourth member,” Kate answered. She shivered at her words. “So far, they’ve always stayed together. We’re lucky that it went for Rose and not you.”

“It’s the mother. They seem to have gender preferences.”

“Still, Dad.”

Her hand touched his arm. For a moment, Alistair was tempted to remind her that they were on duty, but decided against it. They had control of the situation, and at this point, he doubted that a human display would lose him respect. Instead, Alistair nodded his understanding of her point. He wasn’t sure about this mild telepathy that Thorn had developed, but he was certainly not that strange. Still, it made him think about that Eternal that had run from Rose. There was something odd about the girl.
His hand went into his pocket, and he touched the watch that Rose had given him to reassure himself that it was there. Perhaps, he should hand it off to a soldier and send them to London. But… if it was what he thought it might be then putting it into the hands of someone curious could spell disaster. Why the Doctor had chosen this method with an object that was so easily mislaid escaped Alistair.

He didn’t understand the old boy’s decision, and he didn’t approve of the Doctor putting so much on Rose, but he was grateful that Rose trusted him so much. Still, it only reaffirmed in his mind that the TARDIS should have come to UNIT. Rose and the Doctor’s human form could have been well protected. Then again, he had a sneaking suspicion that the Doctor wouldn’t have minded if Rose had chosen to stay on Earth and never open the watch. It would have been a means to escape the memories that haunted him. But if the Doctor truly expected that outcome, then he didn’t know Rose Tyler. It was a mess, and Alistair was uncertain what the Doctor’s hopes regarding events had been.

“Dad, the cages are here.” Relief filled Kate’s voice, and Alistair turned slightly to watch the trucks roll up. Strapped to their backs were large clear boxes roughly 8 feet by 8 feet. The men rushed forward to lower the back ramp and start freeing them. He noted with a sharp eye that they were being slid off onto rolling carts. Good, they’d need the mobility. Small holes were on the side, and he frowned.

“The holes will be sealed,” Kate assured him. “They’ll allow us to pump in argon gas.”

“Good. Now we have to get the Family into them.”

“Rose might be able to help with that,” Kate said. She shifted closer to him. “After all… they won’t wait for their Mother forever.”

“Unlikely.” Alistair’s grip around the watch tightened. It was cool to the touch and completely inanimate. He wished that he could have gotten a hint of advice from his old friend. “But I suspect they’ll know that Rose is in control of the body if you’re trying to set a trap.”

“Maybe, but maybe not.” Kate frowned. “They can see what we’re doing. I don’t like that.”

“Yes, but we can keep an eye on them.” Alistair studied the trio once again and noted that the remaining female seemed to be talking to the others. “Let’s move quickly. I don’t want them making plans of their own.”
Kate nodded, and Alistair tried to remain optimistic. This wasn’t the worst situation he’d ever been in. Far from it. He’d have trouble determining the worst, though mutiny against UNIT when aliens were telepathically taking over children was a strong contender. The memory of that event actually made him feel better. They’d been through worse, and they’d always managed to come out on the other side.

He eyed the cages and the Family thoughtfully. There was no clever way of doing this. They’d have to proceed with brute force if they were going to get the Family into their cages. For an instant, he felt something like pity, but it vanished quickly. They wouldn’t be cruel about this. With the gas, they could make sure that the creatures couldn’t take over other bodies and keep them isolated from potential hosts until their lifespan was exhausted. Straightening his shoulders, Alistair prepared himself for the next stage of the operation.

The shocks hadn’t hurt badly at first, but now tears were gathered in Rose’s eyes, and she was clenching her teeth tightly. Every so often, one of the jolts made her body tremble or a limb jump, but she was still in one place. The solid presence of Mickey beside her helped even as a whimper was torn from her throat.

“It’s working,” Mickey said. “The alien’s presence is fading.” His voice was gentle and anchored Rose back to reality. “Just a few more, Rose.” His grip on her hand tightened.

A whimper escaped Rose as her body shuddered. Wasn’t electroshock illegal or something? Probably was, for this reason. Then the pressure in her head was suddenly gone. There was no more banging on the shields. Instead, Rose heard a faint cry, and then there was silence. She could breathe again. It hurt, but it was a good sort of hurt.

Rose groaned and tried to lift her head. She couldn’t. Everything was fuzzy. The banging in her head had stopped, and the pain was easing. Her whole body was weak, but there was a strange tingling across her skin. Mickey was still beside her, but his brown eyes were calmer now, and he was smiling a little.

“We got it!” Luke leaned over her, grinning like a loon. “The electricity worked! The alien signals are completely gone!”

Her godson’s voice rattled in her head, adding to the stabbing pain, but the joyful tone helped
reassure her. Rose’s head fell back against the pillow, and she groaned. Closing her eyes, she did her best to push her other senses into working. Someone was beside her, checking her pulse and the steady beeping of machines continued.

“Easy, Luke.” That was Mickey’s voice. “We just shocked her. Give Rose a few minutes to recover.”

Mickey was wonderful. Rose sighed in relief. The pain was beginning to clear a little, but she didn’t dare lower the shields that she had locked in place. She thought it might be the first time that they’d held up when she wasn’t conscious. The Doctor had said that eventually, that would happen, but today it seemed was the day for it.

“Pulse is good,” Sharon said. “Rose, honey, can you hear us?” She nodded and heard a collective sigh of relief. “Does your head hurt?” Rose nodded again. “Okay, I’m leaving the sensors on a little longer. I want to make sure that you’re okay.”

Rose heard the rest of what was being said. They thought the alien was gone but weren’t sure. That was fine; she wanted to be sure. Then she heard a hint of static and then a voice came through Mickey’s radio calling him and others outside. Rose opened her eyes and started to sit up.

“No,” Shireen said. Her friend suddenly appeared beside her. “No, you are staying here.”

“But the Family-”

“You are in no condition to help,” Sharon said. “Besides, there’s only three now.”

“That’s not-”

“Rose,” Shireen said firmly. “Let your friends take care of this. Just this once.”

Defeated and unable to get up, Rose sighed and slumped back. She didn’t need to look at her friends to know that they were smiling triumphantly. Outside, she heard shouting and something heavy being moved, but she couldn’t see what was happening. Then Mickey came back inside and pressed something into Rose’s hand before rushing back out. Rose’s fingers tightened around the familiar shape of the pocket watch.
The Father was tense. His shoulders were tight, and the other two had shifted closer to him. Alistair frowned as he studied them. There were shock and fear on their faces. He suddenly wondered if they were aware that the Mother was gone. A sense of satisfaction rose in his chest. Their ship was gone, and now one of their number had been dealt with, the fun was over.

“Careful,” Alistair warned Kate. “Trapped and injured animals are dangerous.”

“The men are pulling out tasers,” Kate said. “Electricity worked on Rose; maybe it will help here as well.”

The soldiers had encircled the Family. Every fourth man carried a large riot shield with special reinforcement that would hopefully protect them from the alien weapons. Each small team had a tech carrying argon gas, another armed with firearms, and the last with taser weapons. Alistair wasn’t sure what would do the most good.

The Family was shifting, suddenly paying far more attention to the soldiers than before. If they were aware of the death of the Mother, it would explain them suddenly taking them seriously. Thankfully, the troops were all in position before that fear and worry could settle in. Slowly, the line was moving in. Suddenly, the Father raised his weapon and blasted off a volley of shots into the line. Men ducked out of the way, and the Father started shouting. The Son raised his weapon and fired shots, but the blasts only shook the riot shields that the men ducked behind. Slow and steady, they kept moving.

Kate spoke into her radio. Alistair stayed still and breathed slowly. No panic, he told himself. They had this well in hand, and Tyler was safe despite her stubbornness. Still, he was braced for that
moment when it all went wrong. Beside him, Kate shifted nervously, and Alistair almost chuckled. It was the same for his daughter too it seemed.

“What did you do to Mother of Mine!” A Daughter shot at the men again. One man had to drop to avoid the shot but managed. He was armed and shot at her, making the Daughter yelp as she jumped. The shot hit the Son who stumbled. The Daughter started to turn towards her brother in horror.

A burst of gas hit the Daughter in the face. Alistair leaned forward, regretting that he wasn’t out there. One of the soldiers grabbed the woman and disarmed her. The weapon fell to the ground as she coughed and tried to twist away from the gas. Alistair held his breath. If the argon did its job, she wouldn’t be able to jump bodies.

“We’ll destroy you!” The Son shouted. “Father!”

“Stop!” The Father screamed. “Stop!”

The two males opened fire at the troops, but it was too late. Three men ducked behind the nearest shield while the Daughter was wrestled towards a cage. A few men held their guns out around the shields and fired a few rapid shots. Thankfully there were no fatal shots. He didn’t want to push their luck. Containing the aliens in their gas forms would likely be even harder. Alistair grimaced as the beams from the alien weapons struck the shield. He could see the metal twisting under the assault. A firearm went off, and the Father grabbed his shoulder.

Good, Alistair thought, nonfatal shot. The men were doing exactly what they needed to. His eyes jumped back to the Daughter. She was in the first Cage with more argon gas being poured in.

“Daughter of mine!” The Father extended his hand towards the cage, but it was already locking into place. The soldiers in their breathing masks didn’t hesitate to slide the door into place. “No!”

It was getting hard to see anything. The soldiers to packed in around the Family now. The Son tried to get away. His weapon was ripped from his hands, and he lashed out, trying to punch a soldier, but the alien lacked the skill of the UNIT troops. Alistair tried to track the firearm as it was picked up by a soldier. A shot from the Father made one of the soldiers fall to the ground. They twitched and tried to stand with little success until one of the other soldiers helped them up. The pair retreated.
“Father of mine!” The other male shouted. “Help me!” He was being shoved into another clear cage being filled with gas. “Release me!”

There was no hesitation in the soldiers. They quickly moved the cages away from each other and towards different vehicles. Techs held the canisters of gas at the ready and stared out beneath protective masks. Alistair almost smiled at the display. For all of their bluster, the Family was falling apart quickly. The Father was left standing alone. One brave tech blasted the Father’s face with argon gas. The alien sputtered.

In a final rush of activity, the Son’s cage was slammed closed and locked as the alien slammed against the clear sides. Soldiers piled onto the Father and a cheer of victory echoed up from them. The alien firearm was held up and passed back. The Father was pulled to his feet. The Father’s stolen brown eyes were wide with shock and fear. Pushed towards the final cage, the Father was helpless as argon gas was blasted in bursts around him.

A sigh of relief that Alistair would deny escaped him as the Father was secured. He heard a similar sound escape Kate. After a moment of debate, Alistair strode out towards the soldiers. Medics were rushing out with him, but he was optimistic that the injury numbers were low. Rushing the Family had worked very well once they knew how to prevent body swapping.

“Release my children!” The Father pounded on the side of the clear cage. His voice was muffled. There was desperation in his eyes that tugged at Alistair. “Release them!”

“I can’t do that.” Alistair straightened his shoulders. “You’ll be placed under guard in the same room. The argon gas will continue to pump into your cages and the room to prevent escape.”

“No, no, they’ll die!”

“All things die. It’s a mercy that I’m allowing you to stay together.”

The Son’s eyes were wide and fearful. It was a new expression on the face. Pressing his hand against the side of the cage, he looked towards his sister who had slumped down onto the floor and was cradling herself. For an instant, Alistair considered putting them all in the same cage before dismissing the idea. They’d be able to talk to each other, but allowing them to be too close would be dangerous. That would be enough.

Soon enough, they moved the cages back towards the trucks. Luke, Gordon, and K-9 came
forward to study them much to Alistair’s irritation.

The cages muffled the voices of the Family. The Father’s distress and anger were clear on his face. The Son seemed to be in shock, staring out at the soldiers. The Daughter had slumped in her cage and was hiding her face. K-9 was beside Kate, his sensor extended as his ears moved. Rose started to walk towards them.

“No weapons detected,” K-9 said. “The Son is carrying some technology.”

“We’ll keep an eye on all of them,” Kate promised. “Gordon, back to the jeep.”

“But mum-”

Kate set her eyes on her son and Alistair watched in amusement as his grandson quickly retreated. It was good to know that the lad had some sense, especially if he was serious about joining UNIT.

………………………

Rose’s body was sore, but she didn’t want to stay on the table. Swinging her feet down, she focused on the silence outside. Sharon and Shireen were right next to her, gently supporting her arms. Giving them a soft smile, Rose basked in a wave of affection that crashed through her. This was nice. Her friends were here to help her. Sometimes, she had a tendency to forget how much they were willing to do for her.

The crisis was over now. She could hear the soldiers celebrating and slowly headed for the doorway. Two men were being brought in. One had a badly burned leg, likely from the energy weapon and the other’s shoulder was burned similarly. She turned away and made her way outside to where Kate was watching the cages being secured.

“We’re moving them to a secure site,” Kate said. She turned Rose and nodded in greeting. The trucks were rolling away, the cages covered and men in the back alongside them. “Luke’s agreed to let K-9 scan them every week or so until this is over. At least eventually we’ll have the bodies for a funeral.”

“I’m sorry,” Rose said softly. “I’m very sorry, Kate.”
“Me too.” Kate closed her eyes and inhaled slowly. For a moment, Rose thought that the science division director might turn on her and demand answers. “But… we owed him. A hundred times over.”

“It’s not a ledger. That’s not why he does it.”

“I know.” Kate offered her a sad smile. “Which made it even more important that we protect him.” Then she shook her head and schooled her features into a calm if slightly irritated mask. “But next time, keep my son out of it, Rose!”

“I didn’t try to pull him in!”

“I’m fighting as it is to make sure that Gordon at least finishes university before joining UNIT,” Kate said. “And this didn’t help.”

“He’s a good kid,” Rose said. “I’m sure if you talk to him that he’ll understand.”

“I might have to ask Dad to have that talk,” Kate admitted. Then she shook her head and sighed. “Well, it’s done now. We’ll keep them in containment.” She looked towards the burned-out ship. “Pity about the ship though. Enterprise could use some upgrades.”

“Enterprise is wonderful as is,” Rose protested. “Besides, they had a vortex manipulator in there, and the Doctor would never suffer you to have that.”

“I’ll try not to take offense at that.”

“We trust you,” Rose promised. “And your Dad, Kate, but that doesn’t extend to everyone who might ever lead UNIT. The last thing I want… the hardest thing is the days when my own species in my enemy.”

Kate made a small noise of understanding. Then she turned to Rose as the Family were wheeled away to separate trucks and hugged her. Rose was surprised at the act but quickly relaxed. Sometimes she forgot that Kate was a mother as well as a member of UNIT.
“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

............... 

Somehow Rose settled back into life at the university. She took tea to Professor John Smith almost every day and felt the weight of the watch every time that he smiled at her. A rumor that they were having an affair reached Rose’s ear, but she didn’t care about it. UNIT had stationed a couple of soldiers in the area, and Mickey called almost every day to check in with her.

Then news came, almost two months later that the Father had died. The body had collapsed, and his cage had been wheeled out of the holding room to the screams of the children. According to Alistair, the two remaining members of the Family talked to each other, but mostly they sat in silence. Even the television that Kate had put in the room as an act of mercy did nothing for them. It was only a matter of time.

Rose ordered take out and went straight to her flat.

Rose knew she had a selfish side despite how highly many people thought of her. While compassionate in general, she was stubborn about her viewpoint and slow to change her mind. As a teenager, she’d been outright dismissive of many of her fellow students as she feared they’d hold her back. At times, she’d even been too judgmental towards her Mother who loved her fiercely. She didn’t hesitate to yell or leave if someone displeased her and normally Rose considered that a good thing, but she did know that it wasn’t always the best course to take.

And she could be jealous. She hated it when the Doctor showed too much attention to others which was silly. She’d seen their future, she’d seen their children, and she knew that he loved her. Still, she had a low tolerance for sharing him. Rose hoped to do better with that in the future, but she knew it was currently a bit of an issue. Hell, she’d even been jealous of Professor Smith’s wife and she wasn’t even real! Despite her best attempts, there were moments that she was jealous of the Doctor’s first wife.

But this might be her lowest point. Sitting here in her chair, watching the clock and being grateful for the call that the Family were all dead. Picking up her glass of wine with her right hand, Rose took a sip and gently caressed the watch in her left hand. She was waiting to release the Doctor and end the singular existence of John Smith.
John who was curious, sweet, a bit clumsy, and infatuated with her. John who would have been more than enough for any intelligent woman with his humor, wit, and vast knowledge of history. Rose took a long drink as her left thumb found the catch. She stopped herself from opening it. The Family would be gone soon, and this would all be over.

And she didn’t even feel bad about it. John was home sleeping, probably having more of the dreams that he shouldn’t be having and would wake up just a dream himself. And Rose was eager for it. She wanted to open the watch and get the Doctor back. She sighed and put the wine aside. Drinking had never been her thing and now wasn’t the time to start. It was far better to drown one’s sorrows in hot chocolate and banana bread.

Her phone chirped with a message and Rose quickly picked it up. Kate had sent a simple message: Son and Daughter now deceased.

Rose supposed that she should feel something for the Family, especially the children. They had lost their Mother suddenly and then watched their Father decay across the room. Both the Son and the Daughter must have known that their own time was winding down. Rose felt a twinge of sympathy, but it was nothing in the face of her relief.

Rose sat up and smiled, bringing the watch in front of her. The soft Gallifreyian letters etched on the sides were a total mystery to her, but she was happy just to see them. She felt something brush against her shields and considered dropping them. She didn’t. Rose didn’t want the Doctor to feel how little she cared about his human counterpart. It felt wrong to be so dismissive of him, but Rose had always known that she had a selfish side. John Smith was a nice enough man, but he wasn’t worth losing the Doctor over.

Opening the watch, Rose stared into the glow for the few moments that it lingered in the watch. Then it faded and Rose exhaled. Setting down the watch, she stood up and began moving around the flat. She hadn’t purchased much, but there were a few interesting textbooks that she was going to take with her, and she’d moved some of her art supplied into the flat from the TARDIS. Rose packed up the clothing that had made its way into the cheap dresser in the bedroom.

When Rose opened the door of the TARDIS, the control was brighter than it had been for months. It wasn’t to the normal level yet, but Rose could clearly see down the far corridor. A smile took over her face, and she strode in with her bag. There was enough light for Rose to reach her bedroom. It was still a bit dark, but with the door open, Rose was able to put her things away.

Unsure of what to do with herself, Rose returned out to the flat and searched the kitchen. There wasn’t much food left; she hadn’t gone shopping for a few days. She put on a kettle and started scrubbing down the counters. Time ticked away. A knock on her door made Rose gasp. It was too late or far too early for a normal visitor. She almost tripped rushing to the doorway.
The Doctor was standing on the other side. He was dressed in John Smith’s clothing, but it was him. His blue eyes glowed with his energy and knowledge. Rose didn’t even let him enter her apartment before throwing her arms around. They were leaving; she didn’t care who saw them. The Doctor chuckled softly, the sound slightly uneasy, but he returned the embrace, hugging Rose tightly to his chest. A soft sigh of relief escaped Rose even as she decided that the first order of business was getting the Doctor back into his leather jacket rather than John’s suit coat.
Rose hummed as she moved through the TARDIS kitchen. It was so good to be home! The lights were set to just the right brightness, everything she needed was in the cupboards, and the familiar hum added the perfect soft background noise. The kettle whistled, and Rose pulled down the pair of mugs that she and Doctor used most often for tea.

As if summoned, the Doctor strode into the kitchen, and his eyes went straight to the small loaf of banana bread in the middle of the small table they usually ate at. His hands were smudged with oil, and Rose nodded to the sink. He rolled his eyes, but the Doctor obediently washed and dried his hands before taking his mug of tea made just how he liked it.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. How is the TARDIS?”

“She’s fine. I just wanted to check her over. It’s not often that the Old Girl just sits on emergency power.”

Rose nodded. That was the closest they’d come to talking about what had happened beyond Rose giving him a quick summary of UNIT’s involvement.

“Fancy a trip?” the Doctor asked. “Or a day in?”
“Trip.” Rose smiled at the idea. “I’ve had enough of waiting around lately. I’d forgotten how dull everything could be.” The Doctor started to smile before he seemed to think better of it. Rose held back a sigh and shifted closer to him. “I really missed you.”

“Sorry.”

“You’re forgiven, but don’t go anywhere anytime soon,” Rose said. She leaned up to kiss his cheek. “I’m just glad that the TARDIS took us so close to our friends.”

The Doctor shivered and wrapped a hand around Rose’s waist, pulling her closer. “I’m sorry I was so useless.”

“I made the decision not to bring you back right away.” Rose snuggled into the hug. The Doctor was himself again, and she welcomed the smell of leather and time. “And Alistair and Kate were glad to have a chance to protect you for a change.”

The Doctor kissed the top of her head. Rose wondered if they’d ever talk about John’s memory of them being intimate. John had taken her seriously when Rose told him to hold off on asking her out, and while their relationship had taken on an awkward edge, his continued affection had been clear. A little flicker of guilt tried to take over, but Rose pushed it down. The Doctor had admitted that he remembered John Smith’s time on Earth, but hadn’t gone further than that.

Suddenly, the Doctor coughed and released her. “Trip, okay. I’ll go to the console room and see what the Old Girl finds.”

Rose reached over and touched the wall. “Don’t mind him, Gorgeous. For some reason he thinks referring to you by your age is a good idea.”

“Stop trying to woo my ship!”

“Stop making it easy.”

Giving the Doctor a tongue touched smile, Rose ignored his scoff as he turned and headed for the console room. She realized with amusement that he hadn’t touched the muffins or his tea. Rose shook her head affectionately and gathered up the plate and tea mugs. As much as he complained, the Doctor didn’t have any real rules against eating in the console room.
After a quick breakfast of muffins and tea, the Doctor hit the randomizer with a wide grin. A moment later, the TARDIS beeped as she locked onto something. Downing the last of her tea, Rose set the mug on the floor and held it with her feet before the ship started shaking. The Doctor darted around the controls, but Rose noted that the flight was a bit smoother than usual. She wondered if he was behaving himself better or if the TARDIS was just that happy to have him back. Either one was possible. Rose imagined that even a short separation of three months had to have been hard on them.

They landed with a soft thump, and Rose noted that the Doctor’s mug had managed to stay intact. With a flourish, the Doctor gestured her to the main door. She glanced down at herself. Rose hadn’t dressed up for a special trip, but she could always duck back inside if her jeans and blouse weren’t going to be enough. The Doctor rolled his eyes at her but didn’t say anything. Rose peeked out the front door only to find a rather industrial room and a small window that looked out at the stars.

“A spaceship.” Rose stepped out of the TARDIS and looked around curiously. “But a bit... worn down.”

“Looks like it’s been half ripped apart.” The Doctor scoffed as he followed her out. “Middle of repairs by the looks of things.”

“Except that I don’t see any crew. If they were in the middle of repairs, shouldn’t there be people doing repairs.”

The Doctor had gone to one of the controls. “Good point. There are no life signs onboard.”

“So, the crew evacuated.” Rose turned and examined the control panels intently. “It’s not like they could just pop out for a fag. This ship seems too large for the crew to be small.”

“No, I don’t think so.” The Doctor sniffed at the air. “But do you smell that?”

“Someone is cooking,” Rose said. She studied the smell. “That’s cooking meat. But no life signs.” Rose peered down of the dimly lit corridors that led off the room they’d landed in. “But who would be cooking if there’s no life aboard.”

Then the Doctor studied the controls. He shook his head. “The warp engines are going full blast,
but we aren’t moving.”

“How’s that possible? All that power has to be going somewhere, and it sure isn’t the lights.”

“Not sure, let’s see if we can figure that out.” The Doctor’s manic grin was firmly in place as he hit a button a doorway on the side of the room opened. “Shall we?” He held out his hand, and Rose took it with a grateful smile.

Her good mood was somewhat disrupted when they walked into the room and found an elegant fireplace with a cheerfully burning fire — a proper, fancy fireplace with a mantel that looked out of a history book. The Doctor made a small sound of surprise and pulled Rose closer to the fireplace as he pulled out his sonic screwdriver.

“That’s not what I was expecting to find.” The Doctor released Rose’s hand and knelt. “This is real, not a hologram, but it’s not a reproduction. This is a real eighteenth-century French fireplace. Double sided too. There’s another room through there.”

“That’s not possible,” Rose said. She peered out the window. “We’re at the edge of the ship, Doctor. This is the hull. The other side is open space.”

Then they heard movement on the other end of the fireplace. Rose knelt next to the Doctor and looked through the opening. A young girl with bright blonde hair and wearing a nightgown knelt in front of them on the other side of the fireplace. Somehow, Rose kept her jaw from hitting the ground.

“Hello,” the girl said. She sounded remarkably calm.

“Hello there,” the Doctor said. “What’s your name?”

“Reinette.”

“That’s a lovely name,” Rose said. “I’m Rose, and this is the Doctor.”

Rose gave the girl an encouraging smile while marveling at her lack of alarm. Then again, she did
seem very young. Maybe she just thought she was dreaming. The fire made it a bit difficult to see past the girl, but Rose could make out a few details of the room beyond her. There was a good sized bed and what she could see of the wooden floor seemed to be very good quality.

“Can you tell me where you are right now, Reinette?” the Doctor asked.

“In my bedroom.”

“But where is your bedroom? Where do you live, Reinette?” the Doctor pressed.

The little girl laughed a little. “Paris, of course.”

“Of course,” Rose said with a nod. Her mind was whirling, and she could hear the Doctor’s mind racing at this strange mystery. “Lovely city.”

“Yes, but Monsieur, madame, what are you doing in my fireplace?

“We’re checking the fireplaces to make sure they’re safe,” the Doctor answered quickly. “Can you tell me what year is it, Reinette?”

“Of course, I can. Seventeen hundred and twenty-seven.”

“Very good. You’re a clever girl,” the Doctor complimented. “Thank you for assisting us. You’ve been very helpful.”

“Have a good night, Reinette,” Rose added. “Pleasant dreams.” They stood up together and shared a dazed and worried look. “Think this is where the power is going?”

“This ship is generating enough power to punch a hole through the universe,” the Doctor said. He sounded put out. “This is our hole.” He gestured to the fireplace. “One side if the 51st century and on the other is a bedroom in 1727 France.”

“Have you seen this before?” Rose asked.
“Not like this.” The Doctor shook his head and frowned. “I’ve seen time tunnels and the like, but
this is…”

Rose moved closer to the fireplace and began to study it intently. “It can’t be an accident,” she said. “Maybe there is some equipment here.”

“It likely turns,” the Doctor said. “Given how it is set into the wall. Rose-”

Rose’s hand found the switch, and she pressed it before the Doctor’s words fully sank in. A small yelp escaped her which turned into a cheerful giggle when the whole wall turned. There was no wave of energy or any strange sensation to mark the passage. One moment she was on the ship and the next she was in a dim bedroom.

The little girl, Reinette, was asleep in the bed and through a large window at the side of the room, Rose could see falling snow. Everything seemed peaceful, except for the problem of she was in France through a turning fireplace on a spaceship. Then the girl in the bed woke up and Rose flinched.

“It’s okay,” Rose rushed to assure Reinette. “It’s Rose, from the fireplace. I was just checking on the fireplace. Do you remember? We were talking just a moment ago.”

The girl blinked at her, surprise on her face, but thankfully there was no fear. “Madame, that was weeks ago. That was months.”

“Oh… uh.” Rose struggled to find something to say. The Doctor would be tickled to find this out. At least the time… slippage was on this side. In theory, she should pop back only moments after she left. That’s was Rose hoped at least. “Must be a loose connection or something.”

She turned back to the fireplace, and her eyes landed on the small clock. Maybe it was some sort of control… the clock wasn’t moving at all.

“Who are you? And what are you doing here?” Reinette asked. At some point, she came over to join Rose. “No one else has fireplace inspectors.”
Rose tensed and strained her ears. The sound of the clock was far too loud in the room. But the one in front of her remained frozen. The small clock on the girl’s mantelpiece wasn’t moving. The hands were frozen.

“Reinette? Is there another clock in the room?” Rose asked.

“No. Why?”

Rose turned and scooped up the girl. She was a bit heavy and made a sound of protest, but Rose kept a tight grip on her. Searching the shadows of the room, Rose tried to identify where the sound was coming from. Her eyes fell on the bed, and Rose was absolutely certain that was where the intruder was.

“What is going on?” Reinette demanded. “Put me down.”

“Reinette, your clock is broken,” Rose said. “But listen. There’s another ticking. A very loud ticking. From something big.”

The girl did fall silent. Rose didn’t watch her face, she was too busy watching the shadows, but she felt Reinette’s body suddenly tense. The little girl wrapped an arm around Rose’s shoulder. Slowly, Rose moved over to one of the stuffed chairs in the room so that she could put Reinette down up off the floor. The little girl released Rose enough to stand on the chair but kept a hand on Rose’s shoulder.

“Show yourself,” Rose ordered. “I can hear you.”

The ticking continued, and the shadows shifted wildly as the fire cast flickering light through the room. Then something moved beyond Reinette’s bed. A figure stood up. Reinette gasped behind her. It was six feet tall, dressed in fancy period clothing and wearing an elaborate mask. The ticking continued as it moved towards them.

“What is it?” Reinette asked.

Rose didn’t have an answer for her and suddenly wished that it had been the Doctor who’d come through the fireplace. It moved at Rose, there was a flash of light off of a blade and swung at her. Rose flicked her wrist, summoning her sword, and sliced off the arm in one smooth movement.
Reinette screamed behind her, and Rose heard more voices in the house.

“Madame!”

“What are you doing here?” Rose demanded of the figure. “Why leave your ship for a little girl’s bedroom?”

“She is necessary.”

“What does that mean? If she’s so necessary then why not just take her?”

“She is incomplete.”

The droid lunged at Rose, its good hand stretched out. Rose kicked the figure back and glanced down at the arm. Gears ground to a stop, and she gasped in surprise. “Clockwork.” Her eyes darted to the fireplace, and she kicked the arm towards it. “Come on then, you. I know someone who is going to want a look.”

The clockwork droid was retreating, its mask blank and expressionless. Rose pursued it and herded the droid towards the fireplace with a few thrusts of her sword that it dodged. With one last kick, the arm was almost in the fire, and Rose thrust her sword through the droid, pinning it to the wall.

“Sorry about this, Reinette,” she said calmly. “Just think of this as a nightmare or better yet a fairy tale.” With her left hand, Rose awkwardly searched for the switch under the mantlepiece as the droid struggled to free itself. “Monster came for the little girl, and a knight came to her rescue. Just a dream. I’m sure you’ll have lots of them.”

“But you’re a woman. You can’t be a knight!”

Rose smiled at the girl still standing on the chair. She could hear people in the hallway beyond Reinette’s door, but she lingered for another moment. “And yet, I am.” With a smile for Reinette, Rose hit the switch, and the whole fireplace turned.

The Doctor was only a couple of feet away when the fireplace stopped, now on the spaceship side
of things. His eyes widened at the sight of her pinned hostage, and Rose shrugged. She reached over with her left hand and pulled off the mask. She wasn’t at all surprised to find more clockwork, spinning away.

“Thought you might want a look, Doctor.”
To the Doctor’s credit, he recovered from his surprise very quickly and gripped the shoulder of the clockwork droid. His blue eyes took in the missing arm and Rose’s sword at the ready. He didn’t ask; he didn’t need to.

“Clockwork,” the Doctor said thoughtfully. “Interesting choice.” He was pulling out the sonic screwdriver when the droid flickered and vanished.

“That’s cheating!” Rose snapped.

“Short range teleport,” the Doctor said. “Still onboard somewhere, but what is it trying to do? Rose, did it say anything to you? What happened?”

“It was hiding in the bedroom, under the bed,” Rose answered quickly. “It said that Reinette was necessary, but also that she was incomplete.” Rose touched the fireplace again. “I’m going to check on her.”

“I’ll check the computers, what’s left of them at least. See if I can figure out what’s going on.” The Doctor paused and stared at Rose for a long moment. “Maybe, I should go with you.”
“I don’t want to scare her with two of us jumping out of her fireplace,” Rose said. “And she knows me at this point.”

The Doctor backed away from the fireplace, and Rose found the switch quickly. As the fireplace turned, the temperature shifted from the cool of the ship to the warmth of a room in the summertime. Rather than a little girl’s room, Rose found herself in a room that now contained a vanity, a desk, and stacks of books on nearly every flat surface. Some time had undoubtedly passed.

A young woman sat at the desk and writing frantically in a blank book with two books open beside her. She hadn’t even noticed the sound of the fireplace turning. She was in a simple soft blue dress, and her blonde hair was in a braid. Suspicion that she knew the young woman tugged at Rose. She remembered Reinette’s words about months passing in what had been mere moments to Rose and the Doctor.

“Hello,” Rose called. “Are you Reinette?”

The young woman gasped and jumped out of her chair. The chair hit the ground with a thump despite the woman trying to grab it. Rose grimaced but smiled as the young woman’s eyes widened at the sight of her.

“Reinette?” Rose tried again. The young woman nodded, and Rose relaxed a little. “Do you remember me? Rose? We met uh in your fireplace.”

“Madame, that was years ago.” Reinette shook her head slowly. “But you look the same.” She took in Rose’s t-shirt with a frown. “I do not understand.”

“It’s a fairy tale, Reinette, remember?” Rose glanced at the door. It was daytime now, and there was a higher chance of discovery. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Of course not. That would be a foolish thing to expect from my lady knight.” Reinette glanced at the door herself and set the chair back up correctly.

Rose smiled. “I wanted to make sure that you were alright, but I seem to have gotten the time wrong.”
“Yes, by many years.”

“How old are you now?” Rose asked. “Actually, how old were you when we met?”

“It seems the lady knight is bad with years.” Reinette seemed a touch uneasy but answered with a smile. “I was seven when we met. I am fourteen now.”

“Seven years. Wow, the Doctor and I were only talking for a moment.” Rose turned to look at the fireplace. She didn’t see any sign of the Doctor beyond it.” Shaking her head, she turned her attention back to Reinette. “But you’re okay? No more of those clockwork men have shown up.”

“No.” Reinette shivered at the memory. “No. I told myself that it was just a nightmare, but…. I dream of it sometimes.”

“I’m sorry. I never wanted it to harm you or give you nightmares.”

“I know.”

Walking closer, Rose was pleased that the young woman didn’t draw back from her in fear. In fact, Reinette was watching her with open fascination. Rose smiled and leaned over to look at what Reinette was reading. The TARDIS translated French, and Rose was a bit surprised to find a book on maths and another on philosophy. Reinette’s book was filled with completed maths equations.

“Studying hard?”

“It’s interesting to me. I confess that I do prefer philosophy to mathematics, however.”

“Everyone has their preferences.” Rose looked around the room. It was silent, but she could hear people a few rooms over. “I’m glad that you’re alright, Reinette.”

“How does a lady become a knight?”

“A series of strange events.” Rose wasn’t sure how to answer it. “I found myself in a difficult
situation but kept trying to fix things. I got lucky and able to help a lot of people, so I was knighted.”

“I’m not sure I’d ever be able to manage such a feat.” Reinette sounded sad at those words. “But I’m going to be important.” Her voice took on a hard edge. “I’m smart, and I’ll hold a place in court.”

“I don’t doubt it.” Rose was surprised by the girl’s tone. This clearly was important to her.

A sound in the hallway cut off Rose’s thoughts. Reinette’s shoulders slumped, and she scowled at the doorway. A soft laugh escaped Rose, and she shifted back towards the fireplace.

“It was wonderful to see you again, Reinette. I’m sure you’ll do amazing things.”

Reinette’s face lit up at Rose’s statement, making her look her age and older at once. Rose gave her a soft, real smile as her fingertips found the switch. “And don’t be scared of the clockwork men. I won’t let them hurt you.”

She hit the switch as the door began to open. Reinette jumped in front of the doorway, blocking the view of whoever was at the doorway. A laugh almost escaped Rose, but she held it back until the fireplace had completely turned. Then the laugh that escaped her was practically hysterical. What was happening here? Reinette was a smart young woman and driven, but why would droids from the distant future care about her.

The Doctor looked up at Rose, and his eyes swept over her with a frown. Shaking her head, Rose moved away from the fireplace and smiled. She went to the Doctor’s side and leaned against him for a moment while she caught her breath.

“I have no idea what is going on here,” Rose groaned. “Tell me you found something?”

“You were only gone for a few minutes.”

“Is that a no?”
“The whole computer system is fried,” the Doctor said. Shaking his head, he sighed and took Rose’s hand. “I’m not going to learn anything from it.”

“So… exploring?”

“We need to watch out for the droid. It’s still on the ship somewhere. At least, I hope it is still on the ship.”

“Given the only other option, I do too.”

“Have you learned anything about the girl?” the Doctor asked.

“Not really. She’s intelligent, but nothing to the point that strikes me as drawing this kind of effort.”

The Doctor shook his head. Frustration radiated off of him. Keeping a tight grip on left Rose’s hand, he guided her over to a nearby doorway. He glanced at her at Rose, and she nodded. Staying here wasn’t helping them learn anything significant yet. The door opened with a hiss and Rose summoned her sword with a flick of her wrist. The Doctor didn’t argue with her decision, and they started walking forward slowly. At first, there was nothing unusual.

“The smell of cooking is stronger here,” Rose said. “Do you think that there’s another door to the past, maybe to a kitchen?”

“It’s possible. With the energy they are spending, they could have multiple pathways. But again, why bother?”

Then as they turned a corner, Rose saw something that made her freeze in shock. At first, her brain tried to reject it, but she looked back at it and gasped. The Doctor’s head turned sharply, and he tensed.

“Oh.”

An eyeball was set into a mechanical device and was peering at them. It wasn’t blinking, but a thin
layer of moisture on the eye shined in the low light. Rose opened her mouth but snapped it closed as bile rushed into her mouth.

“That’s an eye.” Rose’s stomach turned as she managed to speak. “An eye as a… as a…”

“Camera,” the Doctor finished.

He pulled his hand away and pulled open a section of bulkhead. His gaze was sharp and cold as he nodded to himself. Rose shivered but leaned forward to look into the bulkhead only to jump back with a soft squeak and a shudder.

“A heart.” Rose shuddered and looked away. “Doctor, there’s a heart being used as a pump.”

He gently pulled her away. “Human body parts in place of mechanical parts.” The Doctor took her hand again and squeezed it reassuringly.

“I guess that answers what happened to the crew,” Rose whispered. “Used as parts.”

“Maybe not.” The Doctor shook his head and closed the bulkhead with his free hand. “Could be from an organ cloning lab.”

Rose gave him a doubtful look and cast her eyes around. “Really, an organ cloning lab on this spaceship?”

He grimaced and nodded a little. “Not likely, but why kill the crew?” The Doctor pulled her down the hallway, back the way they had come. “Come on, back to the fireplace room. There were fire extinguishers in there. I doubt those droids are good in the cold with their clockwork.”

“Cold. That’s good to know,” Rose said. “But it only makes me more grateful for my sword.”

“Yes, if I’d known how useful that would be, I’d have traveled with a Star Knight years ago.” The Doctor grinned at her, some of his tension melting away. “Then again, if you’re all as bad at finding trouble then maybe not.”
“That’s rich coming from you, Trouble Magnet.”

“Jeopardy Friendly.”

The familiar nicknames made Rose smile widely. To her great relief, the Doctor returned the smile full force, his blue eyes finally lighting up like they did before his time as a human. Stupid happiness that did not fit in the situation rushed through Rose. It was all she could do not to skip all the way back to the fireplace room.

They were back in the fireplace room within a few minutes, and Rose’s eyes instantly went to the double-sided fireplace.

“Okay, so we’ve got droids that used the crew as parts, but why go to all that effort and then not head for port,” Rose said. “They’re just staying in space because they’re dumping all their power into maintaining a time tunnel.”

“It is a strange choice,” the Doctor agreed. “Given that they could use that energy to open a tunnel to a port with the parts they need.” He shook his head. “Something is very wrong with these droids.”

“Are you familiar with the model?”

“Didn’t see enough of it, but I doubt it. Clockwork isn’t exactly standard, but it’s probably part of the reason why they are still functioning. Smaller parts that they could replace even in 18th century France.”

Rose looked back at the fireplace and quickly made a decision. “I’m going to check on Reinette again.”

“Be careful. Time doesn’t seem to move at an exact rate. I can’t predict how much time has passed.”

Nodding, Rose took note of the warning but went to the fireplace all the same. Leaving the girl there with the droid after her seemed wrong, but there wasn’t much Rose, and the Doctor could do
yet. They needed more information. She hit the switch and waved to the Doctor as the fireplace turned. He rolled his eyes but smiled a little. Just before she lost sight of him, Rose saw the Doctor grab what looked like a large gun off of one wall. Right, she remembered, fire extinguisher.

That thought unsettled her, and when the fireplace settled, Rose quickly checked the room. It had changed again, now looking more like a sitting room than a bedroom. Frowning, she checked the walls, but they still looked the same, and the window was in the same position. It was the same room, but Reinette was nowhere in sight. Stepping away from the fireplace, Rose strained her ears to listen. There were voices, but no ticking of clockwork. She hoped that was a good sign, but doubted that the droids had just given up.

Then the door on the far side of the room opened, and a woman in an elegant gown walked in. It took Rose a moment to recognize the young woman. Her blonde hair was styled expertly on the top of her head, and her dress was tightly formfitting on her torso, showing off very womanly curves. But the eyes were familiar, and they lit up upon seeing Rose. It was Reinette, even older this time. Reinette turned back to the door, her hand on the knob as she started to close it.

“Go to the carriage, Mother. I will join you there,” Reinette called out into the hallway. Then she turned back to Rose and smiled. “It is customary, I think, to have an imaginary friend only during one’s childhood. You are to be congratulated on your persistence.” Reinette’s soft smile was warm and welcoming but didn’t hide her curiosity. “Lady Knight.”

“I’m starting to think I’m more of the fairy godmother type,” Rose said. She glanced around the room. “Any problems with strangers in the dark?”

“I watch the clocks closely,” Reinette confessed. “But no, I have not seen any such creatures since that night.”

“Good.” Rose nodded. “Good, that’s good.”

“Who are you?” Reinette asked. She stepped closer to Rose, her blue eyes searching Rose’s face. “You are real. I can see that. I’ve always been sure of that, and yet you are something completely foreign to me.”

“That’s difficult to explain,” Rose said. “And I’m not sure I’d be doing you any favors in trying. I’m just trying to keep you safe.”
“Keep me safe?” Reinette smirked. “Who am I to warrant such protection?”

“That’s still to be determined.”

“Is it?” Reinette hesitated. “Do I truly have a choice?”

“You’re clever and adaptable. I’d say that you do.”

“There are limits to where ambition can take a woman.”

“Limits can be extended under the right conditions.”

“Yes.” Reinette smiled and tilted her head to study Rose more closely. “I wish I could understand you, lady knight. I have spent much more time thinking of you than advisable.”

“Mademoiselle! Your mother grows, impatient.” A voice shouted.

“A moment!” Reinette shouted back. Then she turned back to Rose and shook her head. “So many questions. So little time.”

“I’m sorry that I can’t stay and answer them,” Rose replied. She nodded to the door. “You should go unless you know how to explain me.”

“Mademoiselle Poisson!”

Frustration filled Reinette’s face, but she whirled around and rushed towards the door. Rose instantly moved back to the correct spot at the fireplace. Hitting the switch, she glanced back at the door as it swung shut behind Reinette. What kind of impact had she and the clockwork droids had on this little girl? She could hope that it was positive, but…

“Rose!”
“She was older this time,” Rose said. She shook her head, a bit dazed at the whirlwind that was occurring around her. The Doctor reached for her as Rose stepped away from the fireplace. “The fireplace is definitely locked on her. Whatever the clockwork droids are after, it relates to her.”

“Incomplete.” The Doctor shook his head. “What could they want with a young woman? Anything else?”

“Uh, oh, her last name is Poisson. A servant called her by that as I was leaving.”

“Poisson?” The Doctor’s eyes widened. “Reinette Poisson! She’s Madame de Pompadour!”

“Is that supposed to mean something to me?” Rose asked.

“Madame de Pompadour was the most influential mistress of King Louis XV of France. She’s sometimes called the uncrowned Queen of France due to the power she wielded. She was a famous patron of the arts and businesses, ran a philosophical salon, artist, musician, you name it, and she probably gave it a try.” The Doctor exhaled. “And… she’s someone too important to risk being injured. Her impact on the French court and thus, French history is significant. Both good and bad.”
“Okay,” Rose said. “So, they’re stalking a historical figure. We still don’t know why.”

“No.” The Doctor glared at the remains of the console. “The computer is fired. With how fast time is passing on the other side, we can’t spend time trying to repair it for an answer.”

“Yes, but-”

The sound of something large moving outside made both Rose and the Doctor stop and fall silent. They looked towards the door and heard clip-clops against metal. Glancing at the Doctor, Rose found that he looked just as confused as she felt. It certainly didn’t sound like machinery. The doctor nodded to each other and crept towards the door. Rose summoned her sword, and the Doctor pulled open the door. On the other side of the door in the hallway was a white horse. It looked over at her and huffed.

“A horse,” Rose said. “There’s a horse on a spaceship.” She blinked and lowered her sword, letting it revert to bracelet form. “A horse.”

“18th century Franc is on a spaceship.”
“Yes, but I don’t think the horse came through the fireplace,” Rose said. She tentatively reached for the horse and smiled when it didn’t move away. A startled laugh escaped Rose. Being a city girl, she’d never spent much or any time around large mammals. “Doesn’t seem spooked, so I don’t think that the droid was trying to harvest parts.” She rubbed the horse’s neck carefully. “So where did it come from?”

“Good question.” The Doctor slipped past her and the horse. “There must be more time portals. That’s probably where the droids are.”

“To a stable?”

“French gardens were very large.”

“I suppose that’s true.” Rose patted the horse again and moved to follow the Doctor. A moment later, the horse was following her. “Uh?”

“Made a friend, Rose?”

“I guess so.”

“You can’t keep him. The TARDIS has a lot of things, but not a stable.”

“Just so long as we get him back to France,” Rose agreed. “I won’t leave the poor thing here.”

“We will, but we need to find-”

They turned a corner and found what appeared to be a window. It had an ornate frame, and Rose realized that it was a one-way mirror. On the other side was an elegant small hall that was completely empty. She was able to speak when Reinette appeared, dressed in a stunning ballgown with her hair piled up on her head and decorated with ribbons. Reinette walked straight to the mirror and studied her reflection.

“Another window,” the Doctor said. He pointed as a small handle in the frame that would open the mirror. “There must be more, scattered throughout the ship.”
“And all of them for watching her?”

“I imagine so. Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson, known to her friends as Reinette.”

“You said that she was the King’s mistress.” Rose frowned, not liking the idea even as part of her, conceded that there weren’t a lot of political posts for women in the past.

“She was.”

Another figure walked into the small room; a man dressed in a golden suit right out of the history books. Reinette bowed to him as servants crowded in around the man. All the sounds were muffled, and Rose noted the man’s clear interest.

“This might be the night she and the king meet,” the Doctor said. “The night of the Yew Tree ball. She’ll become his official mistress soon and be given the title Madame de Pompadour.”

“The King’s mistress, the Queen can’t have liked that.”

“Actually, while the Queen obviously didn’t like the fact that he had a mistress, she would say ‘if there must be a mistress, better her than any other.’ They were cordial with each other. Reinette was actually the first person ever to send Queen Marie flowers.”

“Uh… wow,” Rose chuckled. “Bit surprising, but decent, I suppose.”

She considered the young woman through the mirror. It still felt wrong to see the little girl she’d saved all grown up and a mistress to a king. She wasn’t a prude, at least she didn’t think so, but it still felt a bit wrong. Then again, the only romantic relationship she’d ever had was with the man standing beside. Then again, he was an alien which probably counted for something. And their relationship was in his personal future. Maybe she didn’t have any room to judge.

“Well Queen Marie did ban the King from her bedroom in 1738,” the Doctor remarked with a widening grin at Rose’s surprised expression. “Too many pregnancies and the last one almost killed her.” He gestured towards the window. “This is 1745, so the King and the Queen aren’t romantic anymore, but Reinette respected their public position and encouraged the king to have a
stronger relationship with his legitimate children. She never insulted Queen Marie and respected her position, which given how one of her predecessors acted the Queen appreciated."

“Very decent then,” Rose agreed. “But why are robots using up all the power of their engines to stalk her through history.”

“I don’t know,” the Doctor muttered. His good humour was gone. “But you’re right; we need to find that out.”

The king and his servants left the room. Reinette returned to checking her appearance in the mirror. Her brow was furrowed slightly in thought, making Rose wonder how she was feeling and what she was thinking. Was she happy with the possible future laid out before her or nervous?

“She’ll live an interesting life as his mistress,” the Doctor said. “Last fourteen years of her life they weren’t even lovers,” the Doctor informed her. “She remained his official mistress though.”

“Wait are we talking about the same Louis XV?” Rose asked in confusion. “Uh, the one really really famous for uh-”

“Yes, actually.” The Doctor laughed. “They were only lovers for five years, but he was devoted to her for the rest of her life. They were friends; she was his advisor on some matters and did her best to lighten his load.” The Doctor’s voice had softened. “She was his best friend, someone he trusted in a court full of ambition and intrigue.”

Rose suddenly had the feeling that the Doctor saw more than she did here. The urge to reassure him that she loved him romantically grew in her chest, but she held it back. Instead, she settled for shifting closer and taking his hand. His fingers tightened around hers.

“When she died her position as his Mistress wasn’t the focus of her history,” the Doctor continued. “By that point, she was famous for her brilliant mind and ran a salon where politics, literature, and philosophy were openly debated. She’d been such an influential patron of the arts and even some businesses. Even her enemies who disapproved of her admired her a little.”

“Then why….” Rose trailed off, uncertain how to even begin to ask her question.

“In my experience, the males of your species are frightened by competent women,” the Doctor
replied with a sad chuckle. “Your past is full of them, but they are rarely remembered as they should be.” He smiled a little and then sighed. “It’s too bad that we can’t go to one of those salon gatherings. It would be fun to join in the debates.”

“That does sound fun, but we need to focus on the dangerous droids who are obsessed with stalking Reinette. Protect history and all that.”

They shared a soft chuckle, and Rose was about to suggest they move on when Reinette tensed. Rose straightened up herself and watched as Reinette whirled away from the mirror and looked around the small room. She couldn’t see Reinette’s face, but her body language was nervous. Reaching for the doorknob, Rose was only stopped by the Doctor who gestured for her to wait.

“Could be nothing,” he cautioned.

“How long have you been standing there? Show yourself!”

A figure moved out from behind a tapestry. It appeared to be a woman in an elegant gown, but the movement was all wrong. Rose grabbed the knob, and they rotated the mirror. Reinette jumped and looked back towards them in alarm.

“Lady Knight! Fireplace man!”

The Doctor nodded in greeting but hoisted the fire extinguisher. The droid lunged at them only to be hit with an intense spray of cold. Rose gently pulled Reinette back from the droid, feeling a wash of cold against her skin. Ice crystals or something very similar formed over the droid, locking it in place. The Doctor didn’t smile like Rose expected and kept hold of the fire extinguisher.

“Be ready,” the Doctor snapped. “It’ll fight through the ice.”

Summoning her sword, Rose shifted between Reinette and the droid. Sure enough, a moment later, the ice began to crack as the droid fought to move.

“Tell it to answer my questions,” the Doctor said to Reinette.
“Why would it obey me?” Reinette asked. She was eyeing the droid in alarm, but not running.

“They are fixated on you; there’s got to be a reason. Plus, it showed itself when you ordered.”

“Doctor, I’m not sure—”

The droid started to move its arm as the ice melted. Reinette gasped in alarm but quickly recovered. “Answer his question. Answer any and all questions put to you.”

“Identify yourself,” the Doctor said.

“I am repair droid seven.”

“What happened to the ship? What caused all that damage?” the Doctor asked.

“Ion storm. Eighty-two percent systems failure.”

“What is taking you so long to replace the ship? You haven’t moved in over a year?”

“We did not have the parts.”

“So you used the crew,” Rose whispered. “You used them for parts?”

“We did not have the parts.”

“There should have been at least fifty people on that ship,” the Doctor pressed. “You used all of them?”

“Eighty-two percent systems failure,” the droid repeated. “We did not have the parts.”
Rose had known what happened, but her stomach still turned at the matter of fact words. She hoped that the droids had lowered the oxygen or something first, so the crew hadn’t known that they were being hunted as parts. She shuddered at the very idea. It was straight out of a horror movie.

“Repairs by any means necessary,” the Doctor said. Dark angry had taken hold of his tone. “But then you punched a hole in time to come to 18th century France, why?”

“One more part is required.”

The Doctor glanced at Reinette and stepped closer to her. “I need to check something, Madame. I won’t hurt you.”

“What do you seek?” Reinette asked. She shifted back from the Doctor and looked at Rose.

“It’s okay,” Rose promised. “He won’t hurt you.”

Reinette was still clearly shaken, but she nodded. The Doctor stepped forward and raised his hands to her temple. “I think they’ve been scanning your brain,” the Doctor said. “I just need to check…” He stepped back, and his expression grew even darker. “You’ve been scanning her since she was a child! All these years, stalking her and playing in her brain! Why?”

“She is incomplete.”

“What are you waiting for?” the Doctor demanded. He was running out of patience by the sound of his voice. Rose stepped closer to Reinette to calm her, putting a hand on Reinette’s shoulder. “All these years, all this effort and energy, what are you waiting for?”

“She is incomplete.”

“Why her?” Rose questioned calmly, staying near Reinette and keeping her hand on the woman’s shoulder. The question earned her a look of surprise from the Doctor. “You’ve got all of time and space to choose from so why her?”

“We are the same,” the droid answered mechanically.
“We are not the same!” Reinette snapped.

Rose tightened her grip on Reinette’s shoulder in an attempt to calm her down even as she turned the droid’s words over her head. It worked, and Reinette took a deep breath despite her gown and fell silent. Though she glared daggers at the droid while Rose turned the odd response over in her head. They’d taken hearts from the crew to replace pumping, eyes to replace cameras, livers for filters and the other horrific examples that she was certain were scattered about. Yet the computer remained damaged with no signs of repair work.

“What’s the name of the ship?” Rose asked, shifting forward a little.

“Madame de Pompadour,” the droid replied, drawing a horrified gasp from Reinette.

“So, you need her brain for the computer. Or at least you think you do.” the Doctor said. He gave the droid a vicious glare. “Bad enough to kill the crew of the ship, but now you’re messing with the past.” He frowned as Rose kept a comforting hand on Reinette. “What are you waiting for?”

“She is incomplete,” the droid answered.

“Incomplete,” Rose repeated before nodding. “How old is the ship?”

“Thirty-seven years old.”

“It thinks the computer needs to be the same age,” the Doctor said. “That’s why they’re stalking you. They keep checking your age.”

“And when I am thirty-seven?” Reinette demanded. “What is this computer you speak of? Does it want my brain? For what purpose?”

“When complete, the brain shall be harvested. The computer controls the ship functions,” the droid answered dutifully. “Yes. To replace the damaged computer.”
Reinette stepped back, fear taking over her anger even as she fought against it. Rose moved in front of her once again, blocking her view of the droid and taking Reinette’s hands. She trusted the Doctor not to let the droid stab her in the back.

“Reinette, look at me,” Rose snapped. To her relief, the other woman calmed down and obeyed her. “We are not going to let them hurt you. We know when they’ll strike, and we’ll keep you safe.”

“You promise?” Reinette suddenly sounded very much like the small little girl she’d been less than an hour ago to Rose.

“I promise.”

There was a brittle sound behind her and Rose spun around. The droid was free of the ice. The Doctor was preparing to blast it again, but it teleported out with a shimmer. Reinette gasped and swayed. Rose gripped her arms tightly to keep her upright and gently led her over to the nearest chair. Reinette sank into it gratefully while the Doctor grumbled behind them.

“Reinette, how old are you now?” Rose asked.

“Twenty-three.” Reinette shook her head and swallowed. “How is this possible, Rose?”

“The universe is a strange place, a miraculous place,” Rose answered. “But with those miracles come some monsters. But I promise you; I won’t let them hurt you.”

“Thirty-seven,” Reinette sighed. “Am I just to live as if I don’t know the danger?”

“Yes.” Rose nodded. “That’s all you can do, Reinette. Don’t let them stop you from living the life you want. Try not to worry about them. After all, I’m a knight. It’s my job to protect you. Let the Doctor and I worry about them, you live your life.”

Reinette almost smiled at Rose’s words and nodded. Her posture straightened and the scared little girl retreated under the grandeur of the future uncrowned Queen of France.
“And don’t forget that the King is waiting for a dance,” the Doctor added.

Now Reinette did smile.
Leaving Reinette was difficult, but Rose and the Doctor returned to the ship through the time window. Nervous and angry energy cascaded through Rose and she half hoped that they’d come across some droids. The problem was that they still didn’t have a good count of them.

“We know their goal now,” the Doctor said. “And their twisted logic for why here. Good job with that question by the way.”

“Thanks, but let’s focus on stopping them right now. Do you have a plan?”

“This many time windows will need a control center,” the Doctor explained. He pulled out the sonic screwdriver and did a quick scan. “This way, I think.”

Rose didn’t like the uncertainty in his tone, but they lacked information and time. With the droids in the same time as them and knowing where everything was, they were facing a rapid count down. If they were lucky, really lucky, maybe the droids would miss the year that Reinette was thirty-seven. However, as they moved down the corridor, Rose saw more and more time windows.

Reinette was in a garden, smiling and working with the soil despite wearing a very pretty pale gown. She was standing in front of a small crowd in a formal sitting room with a smile, seemingly giving a speech. King Louis was speaking with her and a few others as they leaned over a book laid open on a table. Years and years of her life laid out as a jumble of days that held no order, but great significance. It was disturbing to see a whole human life on display like that. Rose was grateful that Reinette wouldn’t see it.
A few of the window had small etchings in the metal beside them, labeling them by Reinette’s age. They were the windows that the droids had eliminated. Rose wondered briefly why the droid hadn’t just gotten close and waited. They must have charging stations or something on the ship that made that impossible. Maybe the ship wouldn’t last much longer. They hadn’t found out how recently the accident had been.

Her stomach turned at the memory of the body parts. They’d been fairly… fresh. Maybe it had been only days, and the ship just wouldn’t last long enough for them to wait it out. Suppressing a shiver, Rose went with the Doctor into another room. There was a console of controls and wires everywhere.

“This is a control hub,” the Doctor muttered. “Lots of things running through here. Maybe something that can help us.”

“Why didn’t they just open a time window to when she was thirty-seven?” Rose stared at the controls and tried to understand them. It was a mess, and she just wanted to scream. They were lucky that anything was labeled at all.

“The ship is too damaged for that level of precision. They were lucky to even hit the right century.” The Doctor slammed a fist down on the controls. “The windows aren’t closing. Why won’t they close?”

A bell rang in the room, and Rose spun to look at the nearest droid. “What was that?”

“Incoming message, maybe?”

“That’s probably not good.”

“No, one of them must still be out there with Reinette. That’s why I can’t close the windows. There’s an override.”

“So, what can we do?” Rose asked. “We need to focus on that.”

“Find one of the labeled windows before she’s thirty-seven,” the Doctor said. “Tell her that when they come, she needs to stall. Every moment she can give us will help.”
Rose nodded and didn’t wait around to hear more. The Doctor was already moving around the room, checking everything, and focusing on his task. Worry and dread churned in Rose’s stomach. She didn’t know enough history to understand what Reinette’s death at thirty-seven might mean, but she hated the idea of anything happening to her was even worse.

She returned to the corridor and checked the nearest time windows. One had a simple number of thirty-two scratched into the metal beside it. In the dark, it wasn’t easy to see, but Rose knew what to look for. A simple heavy looking tapestry blocked the way, and Rose pulled it back. She peeked out just in case there were guards. There weren’t; Reinette was alone in the room.

Lines were beginning to appear on Reinette’s face under the layers of makeup. Whether it was from the strain of being stalked by clockwork droids or the pressures of the French Court or simply living in the French Court, Rose didn’t know. She was suddenly struck with the awareness that the little girl she’d defended and encouraged was now older than her. Standing still, Rose tilted her head and just watched Reinette for a long moment. Then she stepped through the window to enter the room.

“Reinette?”

Reinette stopped playing and turned to look at Rose, her eyes brightening. “Rose! My lady knight!” Reinette rose from her seat and strode over to Rose. “It’s been years.”

To Rose’s surprise, Reinette took her hands and squeezed them affectionately. Then they sat down in a pair of chairs close to the time window. Reinette’s expression was curious and eager.

“Yeah, I’m sorry about that. Things are happening fast now. Look, remember the question and the stuff about you being thirty-seven?”

“I do. I am thirty-two at present.”

“We haven’t been able to close their passages, so they’re still coming, but I don’t have an exact date for you. When they come, you need to stall them as long as you can. Keep asking them questions or something like that.”

“My good protector, please explain to me what is happening?” Reinette shook her head. “I’ve had too long to wonder, and my mind has spun frightening possibilities.”
“That’s… fair.” Rose swallowed and glanced back at the passage. “I haven’t got much time, though.”

“Then be exact, and I will be attentive.”

“Okay, beyond the doors you’ve seen us enter is… well, it’s like a hallway of doors. Each door opens to a different moment in your life. That’s how I met you as a child and then again and again as you grew older. But the doors aren’t marked, so the clockwork men have to search them until they find the right door.”

“And they will take my head when they find the right one.” Reinette’s hand trembled, but that was her only sign of distress.

“Keep them talking,” Rose told her. “The Doctor and I are searching too. We will find the right door and stop them. I promised you, remember? But I need you to be brave and stall for as long as you can.”

“I shall be brave,” Reinette promised.

“I’m sorry that this happened, Reinette,” Rose said gently. “These clockwork men are interfering with your life. It wasn’t supposed to be this way.”

“Suppose to?” Reinette chuckled. “I do not think even you, my Lady Knight, can say what was supposed to be. It happened, and I have my life, my influence, and my most dear friend, the king. I will be remembered. I find no fault in that.”

Rose smiled and was about to reply when the tapestry hiding the time window was pushed back. The Doctor leaned in, his eyes manic. “Rose! I found it. We need to go!”

“Right!” Rose reached over and squeezed Reinette’s hand. “Remember, stall them. We’ll be coming. I promise.”

Reinette nodded and rose to her feet. Rose saw her glance toward the time window but rushed over herself to follow the Doctor before Reinette could be tempted. Still, as she stepped through, Rose
heard a scream echoing down the corridor.

“I fixed the audio link,” the Doctor said. “Move!”

“Those screams. Is that my future?” Reinette asked. Her face was a bit paler than before.

“Yes, sorry,” the Doctor said. “We don’t have time. See you in five years.”

Reinette didn’t move, and the Doctor let the tapestry drop back into place. Before Rose could say anything, he flicked the sonic screwdriver at the frame surrounding the tapestry. It whirled and sparked. Then he grabbed Rose’s hand, and they started to run down the corridor.

“Are you there?” Reinette’s voice called ahead of them. “Can you hear me? I need you now. You promised. The clock on the mantel is broken. It is time!”

Rose picked up her speed, and they burst into the control room. There was only a moment for Rose to be confused before the Doctor gestured to a large view screen on the bulkhead that had suddenly come to life. Reinette and the king were being led into the elegant room which was filled with people by a group of clockwork men. The Doctor went to the controls and then cursed long string of alien words.

“They knew we were coming. They blocked it off.”

“But they have to get back through,” Rose said. “So it can’t be completely sealed!”

Her mind was racing. Rose eyed the viewscreen. Maybe… she looked back at the horse that seemed to be following the Doctor through the ship. There was no saddle, but she’d ridden bareback plenty of times. Well, not her exactly, but another her. The Doctor was still fighting the controls, anger, and worry playing across his face. Making up her mind, Rose crossed the room to the horse and after a quick pat of its neck, swung herself up onto the horse. It fidgeted a little but was well trained.

“Rose?”
She urged the horse across the room, lining up with the time window. “I’m counting on you not to make me wait too long, Doctor.”

There was just enough time for Rose to see the Doctor’s eyes widen comically before the horse bolted forward. Rose braced herself for the horse to throw her off, but it kept moving. Leaning forward, she summoned her sword and lowered her eyes. Rose threw the sword forward, hoping that it would be strong enough to break the material. If it wasn’t, then this was going to hurt her and leave Reinette dead.

As soon as the sword left her hand, Rose felt it trying to reform, but the moment it was hurtling forward was enough. Maybe it sensed her intent or the long moment was truthfully brief, but glass shattered ahead of her. The image of the ballroom flickered, but it lingered ahead of the horse. Shards of material surrounded her, there was a sudden sense of cold, but it was gone as soon as it had come.

They hit the ground, the horse’s hoofs clanging against the shining ballroom floor. Gasps of alarm echoed around Rose, but she focused her gaze on Reinette. Despite being on her knees, Reinette was smiling triumphantly. Her sword reformed with a flick of her wrist. Swinging her sword, Rose sliced through the head of the nearest droid. The other two spun towards her.

She jumped off the horse and dodged a blade being thrust at her. Rose snapped her sword forward, slicing off the arm and through a large section of the torso. The droid sparked and collapsed alongside the first. The third drew back, and Rose raised an eyebrow.

“The time window is broken,” Rose said. She gestured over her shoulder with her left hand. “It’s over. Even if you take her head, you achieve nothing. You have failed.”

She thought it might fight her, but then the droid simply slumped forward. Then it fell back and hit the ground, breaking into clockwork pieces. The nobles around Rose had all drawn back, their panic fading a bit, but fear still holding on firmly. The king was beside Reinette in a moment, helping her to her feet, and Rose almost smiled.

“You came,” Reinette said. Then she schooled her smile into calm features. “What happened to them?”

“They’re cut off from the ship,” Rose explained. “This wasn’t about malice; this was about their purpose, and now they can’t fulfill it. They shut down.”
Confused twitters surrounded Rose, but she merely sighed. Then she wrinkled her nose. Versailles smelled. Really bad. Reinette smiled at her even as the King kept a tight grip on her arm, still clearly shaken by the events that had transpired. Turning around, Rose eyed the broken mirror and wondered how long it would take the TARDIS to make it through the interference of the time windows. Hopefully, not seven years.
Girl in the Fireplace: France and the TARDIS

Journey Amongst the Stars

By Lumendea

Chapter Twenty: Girl in the Fireplace: France and the TARDIS

Disclaimer: I do not own Doctor Who or any of the spinoff material and I gain no income off of this story, just the satisfaction of playing with the characters.

………………

Rose sighed and looked out the window at the stars. She was stunned by how many she could see over the lights of the palace. It was strange to remember that amongst all this glitter and glamour that 18th century Paris with all of its poverty was only a few miles away. The Doctor had remarked on Reinette being a part of the history of France for better and for worse. Rose wasn’t an expert of history, but even she knew that the French Revolution was due in a generation or two.

Still, the room that Reinette had stewarded her into after the clockwork droid fell apart was ornate and almost overwhelming. Everything was gilded with gold and upholstered with luxurious patterned fabrics. Pieces like this belonged in museums, and likely some of this would, in fact, be museum pieces in the future.

It made her long for the TARDIS. Rose had only been here a few hours, and already she wanted to go home. A bottle of wine had been opened, and while it was good, Rose just wanted some water but knew better than to drink the water in this day and age without boiling it first. There was a dried layer of sweat on her skin that she wanted to shower off, but that wasn’t possible. The past was fun and exciting until the moment you got stuck in it.

“Are you alright, Lady Knight?” Reinette asked. She joined Rose at the window. “You seemed confident that the Doctor would come for you.”

“He will.” Rose smiled at Reinette. “I am confident of that; the only question is how long it will take.”

“I don’t understand.”
“Our ship can move through time,” Rose explained. She wasn’t worried at this point about telling Reinette too much, not after everything that she had seen. “But the droids who wanted to hurt you put holes in time. It might complicate things.”

“His Majesty has assured me that you will be cared for and protected so long as you need to remain,” Reinette promised.

“Thank you for speaking on my behalf.”

“He is a most dear friend. I was confident that he would value the life of the woman who had protected me my whole life.”

“Tell me about him.” Rose turned to Reinette and leaned against the windowsill. “Are you happy with him?”

“Romance was never my focus,” Reinette admitted. “I was married before becoming his lover. It was a good match.” She cast her eyes down, “But a poor personal fit. I wanted more, a chance to be seen and speak. To have my words matter. After I lost my child, it seemed more important to be part of building something for the future. I suppose that a ship in the far future carries my name or at least my title is a promise that what I do has meaning.”

“I’m not good at history,” Rose admitted. “But the Doctor knew you at once. He said that you are remembered as a great patron of the arts and business, even your enemies respected you.”

“Thank you.” Reinette didn’t seem to know how she felt about Rose’s words. “It is perhaps not the life I would have preferred for myself. I think that in another time I might have been happier given that there is a time that has women like you.” She smiled a little and then inhaled and relaxed. “But I have seen great things; I have a most dear friend who values me, and not for my body. He listens when I talk to him and trusts me to keep his confidence when he turns to me for advice or a friend. I am the person that he keeps close to him. I must admit that I take pride in the fact that he needs me.” Then her smile became a touch more confident. “I think you understand that.”

“I do. Though I will admit that my interest is romantic, but I wouldn’t trade his friendship for anything.”

“Knowing you have value to someone, knowing that someone believes in you matters a great
deal.” Reinette looked towards the doorway, her expression gentle and warm. “It makes the days when you struggle to believe in yourself easier.”

Smiling, Rose nodded and swallowed. She didn’t know what to say in response to that. Reinette gave her a nod and then strode towards the door, leaving Rose alone in the room with her thoughts.

………………

The Doctor had been both shocked and resigned when Rose went crashing through the window. It was madness, and yet that meant that it fit Rose. She hadn’t landed on the floor, torn to shreds so he could only assume that she made it through. With the time window broken, the droid hadn’t been able to return so they had ever given up or Rose had destroyed them. Hopefully both. Clockwork was reasonable technology for Versailles to see, but the materials might be too advanced.

He raced to the TARDIS, almost tripping over his own feet. The ship wouldn’t last long. With the engines burning so hot without any place for that power to go, it was only a matter of time before the whole thing either exploded or shut down and drifted into a star. At this point, he didn’t care which. He slammed the door closed and went straight to the controls.

“Alright, Old Girl, Rose is stuck in the 18th century.” His hands flew across the controls, and he smacked the viewscreen a little too hard. “Get as close as you can.” The controls beeped, and the Doctor scowled. “I know that the time windows have created interference! I know that, get as close as you can. She’s stuck there with THAT KING!”

Not that Rose was the sort to be taken in by a fancy title. Rose wasn’t the sort to play around, even if she did flirt sometimes. She’d promised to stay with him and even though he knew how dangerous that promise was, he intended to hold her to that.

“Just find her,” the Doctor said. “We can’t leave her waiting too long in the past.”

The TARDIS hummed around him in agreement, but the Doctor also got the distinct impression that she was laughing at him. Hopefully, the Old Girl’s reach was enough to keep translating for Rose. Suddenly not being able to speak French when she was before might alarm a people. There was no need to tempt the superstitions of humans. The controls beeped, and the Doctor eagerly threw the switch.
It had been three days. Three long days of trying not to second guess everything that she said and
did for the sake of history. If she hadn’t known that the Doctor was coming, she’d be tempted to
disappear out into the countryside to escape the curious gossips that filled Versailles.

But Rose knew that the Doctor was coming. The TARDIS was still translating for her, somehow,
which meant that their beautiful ship had a lock on her. That was a relief a Rose had been halfway
through the mirror before realizing that she didn’t have her translator on her. She’d gotten out of
the habit of carrying it with her. Since they’d been so close to the TARDIS throughout their day,
she hadn’t bothered with her shoulder bag. It was not a mistake that Rose would make again;
always carry your supplies should be rule one, no matter what the Doctor said.

After this, maybe she could convince him to give one of her coats those special bigger on the
inside pockets. Granted, she had several that she wore on rotation, but it would be worth it. It was
something to think about once she was home. Rose paced the room. It was too big, and she felt
exposed. The views of the gardens were stunning, and she’d taken a few walks, but during the day,
it was full of gossips, and everyone stared. Rose had no idea how Reinette coped with all of it.

A knock on the door distracted her, and Rose walked over. Wrinkling her nose, Rose tried to hold
her breath as the door opened. 18th century France was smelly. For as grand, as the palace was,
Rose had seen people just go into a corner to quickly relieve themselves. She took it for granted
before that such an elegant place must have had regular bathing. They didn’t. Perfume was the
primary way they dealt with their body odor, but you put hundreds of people all wearing different
perfumes into an enclosed space, and the smell is still bad.

That was the real reason that Rose had been staying in her room. His Majesty had been more than
grateful and put Rose in an apartment close to Reinette. She’d been invited to attend a couple of
functions, but Rose’s goal was not to impact history further. At her request, Reinette had gotten her
a few simple items of clothing and some soap, so Rose could hand wash her things as needed. The
servants brought her food, and Reinette had provided her with several books to keep her
entertained. They also spoke frequently as Reinette’s schedule allowed, but Rose wasn’t engaging.
She was waiting.

On the fourth day, Reinette had come to sit with Rose. They’d been talking for hours, Reinette
telling Rose all about the court and her patronage of the arts. It didn’t come across as arrogant, and
Rose could see the glow that filled Reinette’s eyes when she spoke about her passions. She’d
lamented that winter prevented Rose from seeing the gardens that their best.
Rose was content to let Reinette’s words wash over her. They had a few interests in common, but Rose had to be mindful of everything that she said, which took some of the fun out of it. Sometimes, she found herself wondering what Reinette would have been like if she’d been more in a more egalitarian time. It made her sad and then guilty for wondering such things when Reinette had accomplished so much despite the ideas of her era.

“What will happen when your Doctor arrives?”

Reinette was completely poised, her expression giving away nothing and her posture perfect despite the heavy gown that she wore. For a moment, Rose was simply in awe. Even when she dressed up, the TARDIS always gave her more comfortable costume versions of old-fashioned clothing.

“Uh, I’ll go with him.”

“And I will not see you again?”

“Probably not,” Rose admitted. She liked Reinette, but in truth, Reinette wasn’t someone that Rose was likely to visit with the Doctor. They’d been noticed too much as it was and repeated visits would probably alter history. “I have my life to live, and you have yours.”

“Will you tell me of your life?” Reinette sat down across from Rose. Her eyes were bright and curious but also guarded. “I- I don’t imagine that it is always so frightening.”

“It isn’t. There are marvels too, but the Doctor and I… we do spend a lot of our time protecting people. Trying to right wrongs and keep history from being changed.”

“Like my story.”

“Like your story.”

“It makes me wonder,” Reinette confessed. “Would my life be as it has been without those creatures? Or would my life have unfolded in the same way? A fortune teller assured my mother that I would be queen in all but the crown when I was only a child. Was it always meant to be this
“I don’t have any answers like that for you,” Rose admitted. “But… would it be so terrible? You seem to like your life.”

“I am content. I have made mistakes.” Reinette grimaced at her words but didn’t lower her gaze. “But I believe that I have left a positive mark. Having a vessel so far in the future that carries my name reassures me of that.”

“I’m glad that you’re content.”

“I know that you do not completely approve of my life.”

“My approval doesn’t matter.” Rose felt a flash of guilt. “And if I’d lived in this time, I might have taken the same path.”

“I’m glad you were not,” Reinette said. She had a teasing smile once more. “We would have been rivals.”

“I thought the king had other lovers.”

“He has a woman at all times for his bed, but I have his heart. I would not allow another to take that from me, and you would have been a worthy rival on that front.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” Rose licked her lips. “I’ve met many strong women, Reinette, women who made history. All of them have had to face trials, but you have lived and thrived with danger stalking you even in your moments of triumph. That’s very impressive.”

“And you? You have never told me how you became a knight?”

Rose hesitated, but only for a moment. Smiling, she leaned back in the elegant seat and studied Reinette. The woman who was now older than her truly seemed curious. Rose was much more interested in hearing of Reinette’s life from her, but she supposed that the little girl who had been brave in the face of monsters deserved her story.
Then a grinding sound, the wonderful wheezing noise echoed around the room. Grinning, Rose leapt out of her seat and searched the room. Wind tugged at her hair and Rose quickly walked over to the pile of her modern clothing, scoping them up in her arms. A bright outline appeared, and Rose smiled as the shape manifested.

“Rose?” Reinette called nervously.

“It’s okay; it’s the Doctor!”

The TARDIS settled into view, its marvelous blue color a stunning contrast to the golds and pale colors of the room. Rushing forward, Rose started to dig out her keys when the door was thrown open the Doctor poked his head out. Relief filled his face, and Rose threw herself against him. The Doctor’s arm were around her in an instant, and Rose wrapped her free arm around him.

“How long have you been waiting?”

“Four days.”

“Sorry,” he apologized. “The time windows made it a bit tricky.”

“It’s okay. I know you, and the TARDIS did your best.” Rose rubbed her cheek against the leather of the Doctor’s coat. “They’ve been nothing but kind to me. Even if I’m sure, they think I’m weird. But everything is okay. The droids shut down, and I made sure that everything was melted down.”

“The king didn’t argue.”

“He was really freaked out, but I think Reinette gave him a shortened version of the story. He listens to her; it’s really impressive.” Rose tilted her head and smiled up at the Doctor as he looked down at her. “Smart men know when to listen to the women in their lives.”

“I do! And good work, with the droids.”
“Yeah, well, one of us had to try and fix things. You’re the pilot, so it just made sense.”

“Crashing through a viewscreen made sense. A truck couldn’t have broken through that.”

“Good thing I have my sword then.”

A soft clearing of a throat drew Rose’s attention back to Reinette. Turning back to Reinette, Rose felt her cheeks warm at having completely forgotten the woman. Reinette was standing, her eyes only slightly wider than usual at the sight of the TARDIS and the Doctor.

“Rose?”

“Reinette.” Rose offered the woman a soft smile. “It’s time for me to go.”

“I see.” Reinette fumbled with her hands for a moment before smiling softly. “Then I will say farewell, dear Lady Knight.” The nickname was soft and sweet in the air. “Thank you for everything.”

“You are very welcome,” Rose answered. She stepped forward and took Reinette’s hands, gently squeezing them. If Reinette hadn’t been taller than her, Rose would have kissed her forehead. “I’m proud of you.”

Reinette’s eyes brightened, and Rose was grateful that she’d said the words. Then she kissed Reinette’s cheek and released her hands. Rose didn’t wait around. There was nothing more to say. She and Reinette were very different women with very different priorities, but she was proud. It was humbling. Stepping into the TARDIS, she gently closed the door behind her and set her things on the jump seat. The Doctor grinned at her, flipped a switch, and then opened his arms for another hug.

Rose happily gave it to him.

*******Next Time: The Empty Child************
They’d decided on a quiet day in the TARDIS. Just yesterday, they’d gotten back to the TARDIS after a three-day adventure dealing with illegal colonization of a planet, a would-be dictator, and miles of swamp. It had taken an hour-long shower followed by a two-hour bath and a solid ten hours of sleep for Rose to feel human again. Even the Doctor had been a bit run down as the swamp water hadn’t been kind to the sonic screwdriver.

So, after breakfast, they’d explored the TARDIS for several hours and found all sorts of odd little things in a storeroom. Rose had found a few of Victoria’s lost things and gotten a promise from the Doctor that they’d stop by long enough to drop them off to her. Among them was a photo of Victoria with Jamie and the Doctor in his second body. She’d make sure to get a copy made first.

After lunch, they’d collapsed in the library. The Doctor had kicked off his boots and stretched out on the sofa to read Pride and Prejudice out loud to Rose while she painted on the nearby easel. While she’d never been a huge Jane Austen fan, the Doctor had given her new context for Austen’s sarcastic style of writing that made the book more enjoyable once she’d understood that.

As much as Rose loved their adventures, she treasured the quieter moments like this. She’d never refer to them as domestic least the Doctor slip into an internal crisis and hide under the console for a couple of days, but she knew that he loved them too. Sometimes they just needed to recharge, and the TARDIS seemed to enjoy lazily floating in the Time Vortex as well.

An alarm broke the rhythm of the Doctor’s reading. Rose had been mixing paints, and thankfully her jump didn’t ruin the painting of the TARDIS library that she’d been working on for weeks. The
Doctor dropped the book on the sofa as he turned and grabbed his boots. Rose shrugged off the apron she was wearing and headed for the door. The Doctor was right behind her as she raced into the console room.

Rose paused long enough to grab her shoulder bag and a black jacket. Pulling both on, she glanced down at herself and grimaced. She was wearing a tight Union Jack shirt that Sharon had given her as a sort of joke. It was comfortable with soft fabric, but it wasn’t the sort of shirt she’d normally wear when time traveling. Still, hopefully, it wouldn’t be an issue with whatever was happening now.

“What’s the emergency?” Rose asked.

The TARDIS began to shake, and the Doctor was rapidly adjusting the controls. “It’s mauve.”

“Mauve?”

“The universally recognised colour for danger.”

“What happened to red?”

“That’s just humans. By everyone else’s standards, red’s camp. Oh, the misunderstandings. All those red alerts, all that dancing. It’s got a very basic flight computer. I’ve hacked in, slaved the Tardis. Where it goes, we go.”

“That doesn’t sound safe, Doctor.”

“It is.” There was a crash, and the Doctor grimaced. “Mostly. Mostly safe.” His eyes widened, and he flipped another switch. “It’s jumping time tracks, getting away from us.”

“What exactly is this thing?”

“No idea.”
“Then why are we chasing it?” The console sparked, and the shaking grew worse.

“It’s mauve and dangerous, and about thirty seconds from the centre of London.”

The Doctor turned his attention to the controls. In the corner of his eye, he saw Rose brace herself and grab onto the edge of the console. He barked a few orders at her, feeling a flash of guilt for them, but thankfully Rose didn’t seem offended. She quickly pressed the buttons he told her to, and it occurred to him again that maybe teaching Rose a bit about flying the TARDIS might be a good idea.

In the old days, a few of his companions had been able to fly the Old Girl. If Rose had been able to fly the TARDIS, then he could have gone to France rather than Rose. The five-day wait hadn’t seemed to have bothered her, but he still hated that it had been necessary. When he took on a companion, he needed to do his best to ensure that they weren’t trapped. Every time he’d failed that in the past had been a blow.

The TARDIS landed with a surprisingly soft thump despite their rough passage through the Time Vortex. Rose ran her fingers gently over the controls but quickly followed him towards the doorway. The Doctor pushed his musing out of his mind. There was something dangerous in London to focus on. Why was it always this city?

………………

They were in a tightly packed back alley between a pair of terraced housing buildings. It was cramped and dark. The air tasted different on Rose’s tongue, telling her that while this was London, it wasn’t her era of London.

“Do you know how long you can knock around space without happening to bump into Earth?”

“We made it a whole week this time,” Rose pointed out. “That might be a new record for us.” She looked around the alley cautiously. “So, where is this thing?”

“Must have come down somewhere quite close. Within a mile, anyway. And it can’t have been more than a few weeks ago. Maybe a month.”

“We were right behind it! How could we have missed it by a month?”
“It was jumping time tracks all over the place. We’re bound to be a little bit out. Do you want to drive?”

“Yes, I would as a matter of fact,” Rose replied. “How much is a little, Doctor? You said it was dangerous.” Rose gestured around at the buildings. “These are pretty modern buildings. If something fell in the middle of London, it’s probably been picked up by the authorities by now.”

“Then it’s a good thing that I have this.” The Doctor grinned and waved his psychic paper in front of her.

“Then what’s your plan? Are you going to run a scan?”

“Rose, it hit the middle of London with a very loud bang. I’m going to ask.”

Raising an eyebrow, Rose held back a couple of other suggestions and a sigh. “Again, if it was picked up by authorities, the average person might not know anything. Or worse, you could put us in the path of a young Torchwood.”

The Doctor rolled his eyes and headed for a nearby door marked Deliveries Only. Holding it open for Rose, he smiled as he heard music flowing out into the street. He was far too calm, but now that Torchwood had crossed Rose’s mind, she couldn’t help but feel a bit worried.

“Door, music, people. What do you think?”

“I think you should do a scan for alien tech so we can keep a low profile.”

“You’re the one in the Union Jack t-shirt.”

“We were having a quiet day at home.”

“Mummy? Mummy?” a soft, childlike voice called from above Rose.

She turned and searched for the source while the Doctor used the sonic screwdriver to open the
back door. Rose didn’t immediately find the child and slowly turned, looking higher and higher as she checked the fire escapes.

“Come on if you’re coming. It won’t take a minute,” the Doctor called. Rose ignored him.

“Hello?” Rose called. “I can hear you, are you alright?”

“Mummy?”

“No, sweetheart, I’m not your mum, but are you okay?”

Her eyes finally reached the rooftops only to widen as she found the source of the voice. A small boy in a gas mask was up on the rooftop.

“Doctor? Doctor? There’s a kid up there!”

Glancing behind her, Rose found the Doctor gone and shook her head. That wasn’t important. She’d catch up later. Heading for the fire escape, Rose reminded herself to stay calm. If babysitting had taught her anything, it was that kid’s reacted strongly to the moods of those around them. The boy might be a bit confused and scared, wanting his mother, but he wasn’t panicking. That last thing she wanted was to scare him with her own worry.

“I’m coming up,” Rose called up. “Don’t worry.”

She reached the top of a flat roof, but the child was still on a higher section. There wasn’t a ladder or more fire escape. Instead, there was a simple rope. No wonder the kid had gotten stuck. Climbing up ropes was easier than climbing down. She grabbed the rope and gave it a solid tug. It held. She couldn’t see in the darkness what it was tethered to, but it would do.

“I’m almost there,” Rose said.

“Mummy?”
“No, but I’ll help you find her. Don’t worry. I’m sure she’s worried about you.” Her child had wandered off in a gas mask and might be in shock. “Just stay there.” She started to climb the rope.

……..

It was a jazz club. Nothing too fancy, but the song washed over the Doctor the moment he came in the back way. There wasn’t much in the way of staff, and no one stopped him as he headed towards the source of the music and human voices. A good sized room was packed with tables and guests all swaying along with the saxophone.

The Doctor pushed his way towards the stage. The nightclub was a bit more minimalistic than he was expecting, but the patrons all seemed happy with the singer’s performance. She was just going into the chorus again when the Doctor climbed onto the stage. He received a dirty look from a nearby patron but ignored it. He slipped in front of the microphone.

“Excuse me. Excuse me. Could I have everybody’s attention just for a mo? Be very quick.” The crowd quieted their chatter and protests and turned their attention to him. “Hello! Might seem like a stupid question, but has anything fallen from the sky recently?”

There was a beat of silence, and then the crowd burst into laughter. “Sorry, have I said something funny? It’s just, there’s this thing that I need to find. Would’ve fallen from the sky a couple of days ago.”

Suddenly a siren sounded, filling the building with a high-pitched whine. Everyone quickly stood up, gathered their coats, and headed for the exits in a practiced rush.

“Would’ve landed quite near here,” the Doctor tried again. “With a very loud-”

“Quickly as you can, down to the shelter,” one man called.

The Doctor frowned and scanned the room again. With the people leaving, he finally caught sight of a poster on the far wall. It showed a falling bomb with the words “Hitler will send no warning!”

“Bang,” the Doctor finished. He was not considering that Rose might have had a point and glanced around only to realize that she hadn’t caught up with him.
The Doctor felt a brief flash of fear and worry before remembering that this was Rose. She was a Star Knight with an extremely sophisticated sword that played with quantum mechanics like he played chess. Not to mention that she was usually more aware of a situation than he was, case in point. She was fine. Still, he headed for the back door and the alley as the last of the patrons headed for the bomb shelter.

…………..

The rope kept swaying as Rose climbed. With every passing moment, it seemed less secure, and a bit of fear was beginning to creep into Rose’s mind. She had the bad feeling that she was missing something important. Then the whole rope suddenly shifted.

“Mummy, balloon,” the child said.

She was drifting away from the building. The child was slipping further and further away. It stood absolutely still and watched her as the balloon carried her away from the rooftop. Somehow, Rose didn’t let go or scream, but it was a near thing. As she climbed higher and higher above the city, Rose could see balloons tethered all across rooftops and searchlights combing the cloudy night sky.

“Oh guardians,” Rose breathed. “No, no, no, no.” In the distance, she heard the sound of engines and eyed the sky as a siren alarm sounded. “This was not a good shirt for today.”

The balloon wasn’t climbing fast, but the wind was causing it to drift over the buildings. Already, she was several blocks from where she had started and slowly ascending. Looking down was hard, and Rose quickly gave up trying to keep track of where the TARDIS was relative to her position. Her stomach was turning as fear sank in. Her hands were beginning to burn as the rough rope rubbed at her skin as she clung on.

Rose considered her options. She didn’t know how high the barrage balloon would be able to carry her, but at this point, she was already becoming too high for a fall to be safe. Eying the balloon, Rose considered her options. The best one she could see at this point was to climb up and cut a hole in the balloon with her sword. A small one that wouldn’t pop it right away. If she could cause a leak and get it to lose altitude, then she could get it low enough to escape. Surely it was made of heavy-duty material… had the Hindenburg happened already? She thought so. That probably meant that it wouldn’t just explode.

Ignoring the pain in her hands, Rose started slowly inching her way up the rope. Her plan was
dangerous, but it was at least a plan.

Meanwhile, a few blocks away, a man in a grey longcoat was standing on the balcony of an officer’s mess. In his hand was a pair of binoculars that while recognizable to those in the mess behind him, would had looked a bit off. Through them, he was watching a blonde woman climb further up the rope of the barrage balloon she was taking for a ride.

“Get those lights out, please. Everyone down to the shelter,” an officer called behind him.

“Jack? Are you going down to the shelter? Only I’ve got to go off on some silly guard duty. Ah, barrage balloon, eh? Must’ve come loose,” a new man said, coming out to join Jack. “Happens now and then. Don’t you RAF boys use them for target practice?”

Jack had zoomed in on Rose’s derriere while the man spoke. “Excellent bottom.”

“I say, old man, there’s a time and a place,” the other soldier said. “Look, you should really be off.”

Jack grinned as he lowered the binoculars. “Sorry, old man. I’ve got to go meet a girl.” He patted the man’s derriere on his way past. “But you’ve got an excellent bottom too.”
The Doctor returned to the alley, still a bit irritated at his utter failure. At least Rose hadn’t seen that. She would have been laughing and giving him that tongue touched smile. Rose wouldn’t have pointed out that her scanning plan was better, but they both would have known that she was thinking it and that it was true. The Doctor was half tempted to pull out the sonic and just scan right now, but then he noticed that Rose wasn’t waiting by the TARDIS.

“Rose?”

A small cat meowed from the top of a trashcan and the Doctor gently picked it up. “You know, one day, just one day, maybe, I’m going to meet someone who gets the whole don’t wander off thing. Nine hundred years of phone box travel, it’s the only thing left to surprise me. She’s jeopardy friendly. You have no idea the trouble the woman can get into.”

Suddenly, the sound of a ringing telephone made the Doctor look at the TARDIS in surprise. Putting down the cat, he opened the door of the small cupboard set into the front of the TARDIS’ doors.

“How can you be ringing? What’s that about, ringing? What am I supposed to do with a ringing phone?”

Pulling out the sonic screwdriver, he got ready to scan the phone when a young woman came walking up the alley. She had a rounded face framed by brown braids and was wearing a simple
dress. Her dark eyes were sharp as she set her gaze on the Doctor.

“Don’t answer it. It’s not for you.”

“And how do you know that?”

“‘Cos I do. And I’m telling you, don’t answer it.”

“Well, if you know so much, tell me this. How can it be ringing?” The Doctor turned back to the phone, gesturing at it and scowling. “It’s not even a real phone. It’s not connected, it’s not-”

He turned back to the woman, but she was gone. Huffing, he grabbed the phone and answered it.

“Hello? Hello? This is the Doctor speaking. How may I help you?”

“Mummy? Mummy?” a soft, childlike voice asked on the other end.

“Who is this? Who’s speaking?”

“Are you my mummy?” the child asked.

“Who is this?”

“Mummy?”

“How did you ring here? This isn’t a real phone. It’s not wired up to anything.”

“Mummy?”
Then there only a dialing tone. The Doctor looked at the phone for a moment before hanging it up. A small shudder passed through his shoulders, and he started to worry a little bit more. Knocking on the TARDIS door, he allowed himself a moment of hope.

“Rose? Rose, are you in there?”

A noise outside the alley drew the Doctor’s attention. He glanced at the phone one more time before racing out of the alley in search of his companion and the source of the noise.

He found the young woman from before entering a house as the last of the regular occupants vanished into their bomb shelter. A small smile took over his face even as a bit of worry warred with amusement. She’d known about the phone; how had she known about the phone? How had that even happened?

The young woman reappeared in the door and whistled twice. A small smile as on her face as a pair of urchins appeared out of the shadows. Then more came into view, popping up from unexpected places on the street. They all headed for the front door, and the Doctor’s smile returned as he guessed what was happening. He stayed in the shadows for a few more minutes, watching as more and more children came rushing towards the house.

.................

The balloon was dropping. Rose’s cut in the balloon was letting the air out slowly. Thank the guardians, it hadn’t popped, but the wind was still a problem. She was swaying through the air, and Rose’s stomach wasn’t happy. Her hands were aching from the death grip she had on the rope, and the problem of the German planes hadn’t gone away.

Suddenly, the balloon stopped moving. She wasn’t being blown towards the next building or falling. They were just frozen in place. A light field had formed around Rose, locking her in place. She looked up to see the balloon itself still being battered by the wind, but it couldn’t move thanks to the rope being held fast.

“Sorry to barge in, it looked like you were doing pretty well, but why risk it. I can get you down safely.”

That was Jack’s voice. Rose swallowed, her confusion only growing at the balloon was held solidly in place. The light surrounding her was gentle, but very much out of place. That was Jack’s
voice, but he hadn’t greeted her like she’d expect.

“Thanks for the offer,” she replied.

“I’m just programming your descent pattern. Keep as still as you can and keep your hands and feet inside the light field.”

“Okay,” Rose agreed.

“You can let go of the rope now.” Jack sounded amused.

Rose pried her hands open. She couldn’t help but brace herself for the worst, but the light beam held her in place. The barrage balloon continued to drift in the breeze while she stayed put. A sigh of relief escaped her, and she looked down at her hands with a grimace.

“Oh, and could you switch off your cell phone? No, seriously, it interferes with my instrument.”

“You know, no one ever believes that,” Rose said. None the less, she pulled her phone out of her shoulder bag and switched it off.

“Thank you. That’s much better.”

“Take your time,” Rose said. She eyed the German planes. “It’s an interesting view. I’m only in a Union Jack t-shirt in the middle of an air raid.”

Jack chuckled. “Be with you in a moment.” There was a pause. “Hold tight!”

“To what?”

“Fair point.”
Suddenly, she was sliding down the light field as if it were a water slide. Somehow, she didn’t scream even when everything flashed past her. There was too much visual input, and her balance was completely thrown out the window. Rose landed and blinked, trying to keep her stomach from giving up breakfast.

Then she was in a dark space with Jack grinning at her. Dizziness hit Rose hard, and she blinked frantically, trying to hold back the flickers of darkness at the edge of her eyes. Jack was watching her with that charming smile of his.

“I’ve got you. You’re fine; you’re just fine. The tractor beam, it can scramble your head just a little.”

“Yeah… that fits,” Rose managed. “Hello.”

“Hello,” Jack returned.

“Good to see- uh thanks for the lift. It was a bit much out there.”

“Are you alright?” Jacek gently lowered Rose so she could stand on her feet.

“Why, are you expecting me to faint or something?”

“You look a little dizzy.”

“That’s…” Rose swayed. “That sounds very correct.” Jack grabbed her arm. “Uh… anyplace that I can sit-”

In the future, Rose would deny that she fainted. Jack would insist that she swooned, even if it was Athena and Melody who were hearing the story. But the world did go black, and Rose did fall over with Jack only just keeping her from hitting her head.

..................
“It’s got to be black market. You couldn’t get all this on coupons,” one boy said.

The children were all gathered around the family dining table, which was covered with food. The Doctor peeked out carefully, watching them, and taking everything in. He was inclined to agree with the boy himself.

“Ernie, how many times?” the young woman he’d followed said. “We are guests in this house. We will not make comments of that kind. Washing up.”

The children laughed at her remark, and the first boy groaned. “Oh, Nancy.”

Nancy just turned her eyes to another of the children. “Haven’t seen you at one of these before.”

“He told me about it,” the boy said, pointing to Ernie.

“Sleeping rough?”

“Yes, miss.”

“All right, then. One slice each, and I want to see everyone chewing properly.”

The plate of slices of meat was handed around the table, and the Doctor quickly slipped to the table. None of them noticed, and it was all he could do, not to laugh.

“Thank you, miss.”

“Thanks, miss.”

“Thank you, miss.”

The plate was handed to the Doctor, who smiled. “Thanks, miss.”
His voice stood out amongst the young ones and all the children tenses, looking at him with wide and panicked eyes. Only Nancy seemed to stay calm when all the others were ready to bolt. Several were already out of their chairs.

“It’s all right. Everybody stay where you are!”

“Good here, innit? Who’s got the salt?” the Doctor asked.

“Back in your seats. He shouldn’t be here either,” Nancy said.

The children slowly sat back down. They all hesitated to eat until the Doctor tucked in. It wasn’t half bad. Not great, but definitely good.

“So, you lot, what’s the story?”

“What do you mean?” Ernie asked.

“You’re homeless, right? Living rough?”

“Why do you want to know that?” another boy asked. “Are you a copper?”

“Of course I’m not a copper. What’s a copper going to do with you lot anyway? Arrest you for starving?” the Doctor scoffed. He looked around the table at the sad state of the children and almost smiled. Here they were in rough shape and looking after each other. Still, they weren’t supposed to be here. “I make it 1941. You lot shouldn’t even be in London. You should’ve been evacuated to the country by now.”

“I was evacuated. Sent me to a farm.”

“So why’d you come back?”
“There was a man there.” The Doctor heard everything that wasn’t being said and anger twisted in his gut.

“Yeah, same with Ernie. Two homes ago.”

“Shut up,” Ernie snapped. He quickly regained his composure. “It’s better on the streets anyway. It’s better food.”

“Yeah. Nancy always gets the best food for us.”

“So, that’s what you do, is it, Nancy?” the Doctor asked.

“What is?” Nancy had narrowed her eyes slightly at him.

“As soon as the sirens go, you find a big fat family meal still warm on the table with everyone down in the air raid shelter and bingo! Feeding frenzy for the homeless kids of London Town.” The Doctor waved his knife and fork around. “Puddings for all, as long as the bombs don’t get you.”

“Something wrong with that?” Nancy asked with a sharp tone.

“Wrong with it? It’s brilliant. I’m not sure if it’s Marxism in action or a West End musical.”

“Why’d you follow me?” Nancy asked, changing the topic. “What do you want?”

“I want to know how a phone that isn’t a phone gets a phone call. You seem to be the one to ask.”

“I did you a favour,” Nancy answered. “I told you not to answer it, that’s all I’m telling you.

“Great, thanks,” the Doctor said with forced cheer. The topic clearly bothered the girl deeply, which meant that it was likely dangerous. It shouldn’t be happening. Forcing a smile, he looked around at the children. “And I want to find a blonde in a Union Jack. I mean a specific one. I didn’t just wake up this morning with a craving. Anybody seen a girl like that?”
The children laughed, but Nancy came around the table and took his plate. The laughter faded, and he noted the young woman’s tension and apparent anger.

“What have I done wrong?”

“You took two slices. No blondes, no flags,” she said sternly. “Anything else before you leave?” Her voice dared him to push his luck. It was the sort of dare he was very good at.

“Yeah, there is actually. Thanks for asking. Something I’ve been looking for. Would’ve fallen from the sky about a month ago, but not a bomb. Not the usual kind, anyway. Wouldn’t have exploded. Probably would have just buried itself in the ground somewhere, and it would have looked something like this.”

The Doctor held up a rough sketch of the craft the Tardis was following. In truth, it just looked like some kind of metal tube. The children stared at the drawing with confusion. Before he could say anything more, a knock at the door made everyone jump.

“Mummy?” a child’s voice called. “Are you in there, mummy?”

Moving to the window, the Doctor pulled back the curtain and checked the front stoop. There was a small boy in a gas mask.

“Mummy?” the boy called.

“Who was the last one in?” Nancy demanded.

The Doctor turned to watch the children and Nancy. One boy pointed to Ernie.

“Him.”

“No, he came round the back,” Nancy said. “Who came in the front?”
“Me.”

“Did you close the door?”

“Er….” The boy trailed off.

“Did you close the door?” Nancy asked more urgently.

“Mummy? Mummy? Mummy?”

Nancy ran into the hallway past the Doctor in a rush. He followed her and watched her frantically bolt the front door. Fear and grief filled her eyes. Once again, nothing here made sense.

“What’s this, then?” he asked gently. “It’s never easy being the only child left out in the cold, you know.”

“I suppose you’d know.”

“I do actually, yes.”

“It’s not exactly a child,” Nancy answered with an air of defeat.

“Mummy?”

Nancy rushed back into the dining room where the children were all waiting with confused expressions. The Doctor was glad that it wasn’t just him, but Nancy’s worry and fear were so real that he thought he might just be able to reach out and touch it.

“Right, everybody out. Across the back garden and under the fence. Now! Go! Move!”

At her words, the urchins all grabbed their coats and followed her instructions. The Doctor stayed
out of the way as the children all ran out the back. Nancy knelt and spoke to the one remaining child, a small girl who couldn’t have been more than four.

“Come on, baby; we’ve got to go, all right? It’s just like a game. Just like chasing. Take your coat, go on. Go!”

“Mummy? Mummy? Please let me in, mummy. Please let me in, mummy.”

The Doctor leaned into the hallway to see a small hand reaching through the letterbox.

“Are you all right?” the Doctor asked gently.

“Please let me in,” the child begged.

A glass vase sailed past him and hit the door just above the letterbox. The Doctor jumped at the sudden crash, and the hand withdrew. He turned to see Nancy staring at the door.

“You mustn’t let him touch you!”

“What happens if he touches me?”

“He’ll make you like him.”

“And what’s he like?” the Doctor asked.

“I’ve got to go.”

“Nancy, what’s he like?”

“He’s empty,” the young woman answered sadly. Beside them, the telephone started to ring. “It’s him. He can make phones ring. He can. Just like with that police box you saw.”
The Doctor picked up the phone, still watching Nancy and heard, “Are you my mummy?”

Nancy snatched the phone and put it back on the hook. Behind them, the radio began to play in the dining room.

“Mummy? Please let me in, mummy,” the voice called through the radio.

A clockwork monkey on the floor began to move. “Mummy, mummy, mummy,” it called.

“You stay if you want to,” Nancy said. Then she was out the back, leaving the Doctor confused and alone. The small hand appeared through the letterbox again, and this time the Doctor noted a large scar on the back of the hand.

“Mummy? Let me in please, mummy. Please let me in.”

“Your mummy isn’t here,” the Doctor answered.

“Are you my mummy?”

“No mummies here. Nobody here but us chickens. Well, this chicken.”

“I’m scared.”

The words made the Doctor frown. “Why are those other children frightened of you?”

“Please let me in, mummy. I’m scared of the bombs.”

“Okay,” the Doctor agreed. “I’m opening the door now.”
The child pulled back his hand. The Doctor slowly unbolted the front door, his hearts beating a bit faster than he’d ever admit to. When he opened the door, the front step was empty, and the street was deserted.
Waking up in a strange place wasn’t a strange event for Rose. Life on the TARDIS was unpredictable. She stayed still and breathed slowly, trying to make it appear that she was still asleep. The surface below her was soft and warm. Prisoners weren’t usually left someplace this comfortable, and she relaxed a little.

Then the memory of what had happened hit her. Jack. He had helped her down from the balloon when cutting it to let the air out had limited success. Her hands stung, and she recalled the balloon and that strange child who had kept calling for his mother and hadn’t been alarmed when she drifted away. Opening her eyes, Rose put it out of her head. There were other things to worry about right now.

Rose cautiously looked around the ship. It was small and compact, almost like the submarines in old films and photos. Everything was tightly packed, and it was fairly dark. A control panel a few feet away was full of small lights and had a window that looked out over London. She’d never seen anything like this before. Jack didn’t use a ship as far as she knew other than the TARDIS he’d eventually share with Athena and Melody. Wow, she didn’t want to think about that right now.

Sitting up the rest of the way, Rose swung her legs out of bed and got ready to stand. There was a man in the control chair next to the controls. It was Jack, and he swung around as her feet hit the floor with a soft thump. Jack was smiling at her, but it was that charming smile he used on people when he first met them. It wasn’t forced, but it wasn’t his normal Rose smile. He didn’t know her. Rose’s heart skipped a beat as nervousness took hold. This was their first meeting in his timeline.

Don’t be nervous, Rose told herself, but it didn’t help much. This was Jack, one of her all-time best friends who would literally die to protect her in his future. Who would hang around Earth for years
to help keep her safe and prove himself loyal over and over again. Who would eventually date her
daughter- okay, she really didn’t want to think about that one. It was a lot of pressure.

“Thanks for the help,” Rose said. “I was starting to worry about crashing into the side of a
building.”

“You’re welcome.” Jack chuckled a little. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine.” Rose hesitated for a moment. “Got any lights?” Jack hit a button, and the small cabin
brightened enough that Rose could see thing a bit more clearly. “Thanks.” Smiling a little, she
turned her attention fully to Jack. “I think introductions are in order.”

“Captain Jack Harkness, One Three Three Squadron, Royal Air Force.” Jack pulled a small wallet
from his coat and handed it to her. “American volunteer.”

Rose accepted the ID card with a small chuckle. Her mind buzzed softly as the psychic paper tried
to control what she saw. It was unexpected, and Rose made a note to talk to the Doctor about it
later. Still, she was able to see the words on the paper that Jack had handed over.

“That’s funny,” she teased. “I could swear that this is psychic paper.” She gave Jack a tongue
touched smile. “You know, that stuff that tells me whatever you want it to tell me.”

“How do you know?” Jack asked. He didn’t seem worried by her knowledge.

“Two things. One, I have a friend who uses this all the time.”

“Ah.”

“And two, you just handed me a piece of paper telling me you’re single and you work out.”

Jack laughed and held out his hand. “Tricky thing, psychic paper.”

“Yes, it is.” Rose smiled and handed the paper back, trying to push her thoughts into the material.
It was harder than she thought it would be to keep her thoughts narrowed on a single purpose.

“Rose Tyler,” Jack read. “You’re flattered, but you have your eye on someone.” He pouted cutely. “A day late and a dollar short?”

“More like years late, I’m afraid.” Rose sighed and shrugged. “We’re working through some stuff, but even a boy as pretty as you isn’t going to sway me.”

“I’m both flattered and offended.”

“I’m sure you’ll manage.” Rose tilted her head and studied Jack for a moment. “So, what brings you to London?” She nodded at the controls. “This is a nice little ship, and you sure aren’t a local boy.”

“You’re not a local girl.”

“Of course, I am,” Rose huffed dramatically. “Born and raised Londoner.”

“A cell phone, a liquid crystal watch, and fabrics that won’t be around for at least another two decades.”

“I never said that I was a girl from now.” Rose shifted her hands and flinched as the fabric of the bed rubbed her hands.

“No, no, you didn’t.” Jack pointed at her hands. “Did you burn your hands?”

“Yeah.” Rose looked down at her hands. A bomb whistled as it dropped past the ship. “It was better than the alternative.” She glanced at the window. “I assume you have some sort of cloaking tech on.”

“Don’t worry; no one can see us,” Jack assured her. He stood up and stepped towards her. “Can I see your hands?”
“You gonna give me first aide?” Rose asked. She raised an eyebrow and looked around. “Do you have a medical bay tucked away in here.”

“Better.” Jack picked up a scarf as Rose stood up and gently wrapped it around her wrists.

“Uh… this is an odd way to start first aid.”

“It’s just to keep your hands still,” Jack said. “This won’t hurt, I promise.”

Rose didn’t struggle. This was Jack. He might not know her, but she was confident that Jack would never hurt her. For all his bluster, he was a good man and a gentle one. To her amazement, a golden cloud appeared when Jack pressed a button. It surrounded her hands, and there was a strange tickling sensation. Keeping herself still, Rose tried to see what was happening, but the cloud was just a mass of tiny dots. She couldn’t make out any details.

“Nanotech?” she guessed.

“In this form, its called nanogene,” Jack offered. “The air in here is full of them. They just repaired three layers of your skin.”

“Did you add them or did they come with the ship?” Rose asked curiously.

“Came with the ship.” Amusement coloured Jack’s voice. “You can move now.”

He reached to undo the scarf, but Rose was able to turn her hands enough to pull it free herself. UNIT would have been so pleased to know that their training was still proving so useful. Still, she’d been trained under false pretenses, so Rose didn’t have any plans to thank them. The light in the ship was still low, but Rose was able to turn her palms up and examine the new layer of skin. It was a touch tender and unbelievably smooth, but it was no doubt healed.

“They do nice work.”

“So you’re a London girl, but not from now.” Jack’s smile turned charming again. “At least you aren’t pretending you’re not a Time Agent. I appreciate that.”
Rose had heard the title before but had never gotten any details as to what a Time Agent did or how they worked for. Jack had let a few things slip over their many lunch dates over the years, and Rose hoped that it would be enough.

“I try not to insult people’s intelligence.”

“That’s a good system. I’ve been expecting one of you guys to show up. Though not, I must say, by barrage balloon. Do you often travel that way?”

“I can honestly say no.” Rose shook her head. “I don’t recommend it.”

That got a laugh out of Jack. “Sounds like a story.”

“Not really,” Rose admitted. “There was a child, I thought they were stranded, but now I’m afraid that they were trying to prank me. A really terrible prank.”

“Yikes, but shall we get down to business?”

“Business?” Rose repeated.

“Shall we have a drink on the balcony? Bring up the glasses.”

He grinned as he opened the hatch on the top of his spaceship with almost a flourish. He nodded to a pair of waiting glasses. “Bring up the glasses.”

Rose almost groaned, then she almost laughed. This was Jack to a level she’d never seen him. With a cocky smile, he vanished up top, and Rose shook her head fondly. Picking up the glasses, she carefully followed up him onto the top of the spaceship. The wind had died down a bit thankfully, which kept Rose calm as she saw how high up they were. Below them, searchlights were moving across the sky, and she could see more barrage balloon bobbing in the breeze, thankfully all tethered.
“Problem?” Jack asked.

“I hate not seeing what I’m standing on,” Rose admitted.

Jack chuckled and gave her another charming smile. He pulled a small remote from his coat, and a moment later the smooth hull of the ship appeared beneath Rose’s feet. She relaxed and looked around. A small table with an old fashioned record player and bottle of champagne was nearby. Rose figured he must have set up while she was having a nap. Her eyes jumped up to the massive clock face of Big Hen beside them.

“Nice parking spot.”

“First rule of active camouflage. Park somewhere you’ll remember.” Jack popped open the bottle of champagne and filled the glasses. Rose struggled not to giggle.

Nancy crept forward along the railroad tracks with purpose and light steps. Her dark clothing helped her blend into the shadows as she slipped into a small shack. In her arms was a bundle with the cans and packaged food that she’d taken from the Lloyd’s kitchen. There was a small glimmer of pleasure in her chest, but she didn’t let it grow.

With quick and practiced movements, Nancy packed the food away and dusted off her hands. She was considering turning in for the night when she stood up and found the Doctor smiling at her from a few feet away. He was relaxed, and despite the stories from the children she helped out, she had the sense that he wasn’t going to hurt her.

“How’d you follow me here?” Nancy asked.

“I’m good at following, me. Got the nose for it.”

She didn’t laugh at the joke, at least she hoped he meant it as a joke. “People can’t usually follow me if I don’t want them to.”
“My nose has special powers.”

“Yeah? That’s why it’s…” Nancy trailed off, not feeling much like joking herself.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Do your ears have special powers too?”

“What are you trying to say?”

She got the impression he really didn’t know or was really good at playing the fool. He wasn’t one. Nancy was sure of that, and she didn’t like having him poking around. He was too curious about the worst things for a person to be curious about.

“Goodnight, Mister,” she said.

“Nancy, there’s something chasing you and the other kids,” the man said. His voice was firm and gentle at the same time, almost pleading. “Looks like a boy and it isn’t a boy, and it started about a month ago, right? The thing I’m looking for, the thing that fell from the sky, that’s when it landed. And you know what I’m talking about, don’t you?”

“There was a bomb,” Nancy admitted. She didn’t know why she was willing to tell him. It was a bad idea. “A bomb that wasn’t a bomb. Fell the other end of Limehouse Green Station.”

“Take me there.”

“There’s soldiers guarding it. Barbed wire. You’ll never get through.”
“Try me.”

“You sure you want to know what’s going on in there?” Nancy asked.

“I really want to know.”

He seemed earnest, and Nancy knew he wouldn’t stop following her. At least, she had tried to warn him. If Jam- if he was infected, it wasn’t her fault.

“Then there’s someone you need to talk to first.”

“And who might that be?”

“The Doctor,” she answered.

---------------------

Jack was in rare flirt form. It made Rose realize that even with all the flirty comments in her past, he’d never actually meant any of it. When he was in full-on seduction mode, you noticed, and it was a little uncomfortable to be honest, at least for Rose who saw him as a big brother. They had a strange relationship.

“You know, it’s getting a bit late. I should really be getting back.”

“We’re discussing business.”

“This isn’t business,” Rose said. “This is champagne.” She gestured to the bottle in question.

“I try never to discuss business with a clear head. Are you travelling alone? Are you authorised to negotiate with me?” Jack shifted even closer to her.
“What would we be negotiating?” Rose asked, curious as to what Jack was doing.

“I have something for the Time Agency. Something they’d like to buy. Are you in power to make payment?”

“I’m afraid not,” Rose answered. “Not alone at least,” she added quickly. “My partner and I would need to discuss it first.”

“Partner?”

“Talking of him, I should really find where he’s gone off to.” Rose looked out into the city.

“He?”

“So when you say your partner, just how disappointed should I be?”

“We’re on a spaceship tethered to Big Ben during a German air raid,” Rose pointed out. She was torn between horror and laughter. “Do you really think now’s a good time to be coming on to me?”

“Perhaps not.” Jack gave her another cocky smile. “Do you like Glenn Miller?”

“Yes.”

Rose knew what was coming. The memory of Prague and Jack cutting in sprang to the forefront of her mind. A moment late, Jack pressed another button on his remote, and Moonlight Serenade began to play. He didn’t wait for an invitation, stepping closer and taking Rose in his arms to dance. She barely held in a giggle. Their song indeed.

“It’s 1941, the height of the London Blitz, the height of the German bombing campaign, and something else has fallen on London. A fully equipped Chula warship. The last one in existence, armed to the teeth. And I know where it is because I parked it. If the Agency can name the right price, I can get it for you. But in two hours, a German bomb is going to fall on it and destroy it forever. That’s your deadline. That’s the deal. Now, shall we discuss payment?”
“You’re not leaving me much time.”

“Two hours, the bomb falls. There’ll be nothing left but dust and a crater.”

“You used to be a Time Agent, and now you’re some kind of freelancer. So is this what you do?” Rose asked. “Find things and put them on a deadline?”

“You said you needed to talk to your partner?”

“You didn’t answer my question,” Rose pointed out. “But yes.” She shifted her hands and gently pushed Jack away. “So, if you’re so determined then we should go find him. He’s the one in charge of technology.”

“And what are you in charge of?”

Rose fixed Jack with a knowing look. He didn’t flinch under her gaze, but his eyes flickered the tiniest bit. “The people.” She didn’t linger on the silent conversation and gestured out into the city. “Got a scan? He’s got alien tech on him.”

“I do, indeed.”

Jack’s smile returned full force, and he stepped closer to Rose once again. He shifted his wrist, and the vortex manipulator he wore came into view. He pressed a few buttons, and when it beeped, held his arm out to Rose. With a fond shake of her head, Rose took his arm and let him lead her back into the ship.
Journey Amongst the Stars
By Lumendea

Chapter Twenty-Four: The Empty Child: Albion Hospital

Disclaimer: I do not own Doctor Who or any of the spinoff material and I gain no income off of this story, just the satisfaction of playing with the characters.

AN: I realized while writing this chapter, that the episode never makes it clear how Jack and Rose get to the hospital! Did they walk through the Air Raid or take his ship that could only teleport him?

………………

The Doctor couldn’t help but think that Nancy would have made a good companion if he didn’t already have Rose. She was sharp and observant and brave despite the palpable terror that haunted her every step. Of course, he did have Rose, and there would be no thoughts of replacing her. Then again, another person on the TARDIS might help. Might make things a little less domestic. He’d started cooking again! Him! All because it wasn’t fair that Rose did all the cooking, even if she was very good at it. So things were a bit more domestic than he liked right now. Rose just had a talent of disarming him. It was a bit annoying, really.

Shaking his head, he focused his attention on the fenced off area. Pulling out a pair of advanced binoculars from his pocket, he scanned the area. What he saw made him frown. The locals clearly knew that there was something different about what had crashed here. Rose’s comment about Torchwood came back to him. If that lot were here, then everything would be even more complicated.

“The bomb’s under that tarpaulin,” Nancy explained.” They put the fence up overnight. See that building? The hospital.”

He turned his sights to the building in question. Other than being close by, nothing about it stood out. “What about it?” he asked.

“That’s where the doctor is. You should talk to him.”
“For now, I’m more interested in getting in there.”

“Talk to the doctor first,” Nancy insisted.

“Why?”

“Because then maybe you won’t want to get inside,” Nancy said. She meant what she said. Then she picked up her pack and stood up, moving in the shadows the way they’d come.

“Where’re you going?” the Doctor asked.

“There was a lot of food in that house. I’ve got mouths to feed,” Nancy said, her tone matter of fact. “Should be safe enough now.”

The Doctor hesitated for only a moment. “Can I ask you a question?” She didn’t stop him. “Who did you lose?”

“What?” She wasn’t surprised as much as guarded.

“The way you look after all those kids. It’s because you lost somebody, isn’t it?” The Doctor kept his voice gentle. “You’re doing all this to make up for it.”

Nancy swallowed, but to his surprise, she answered. “My little brother. Jamie. One night I went out looking for food. Same night that thing fell. I told him not to follow me, I told him it was dangerous, but he just…” Nancy struggled, but her grief was tightly controlled. “He just didn’t like being on his own.”

“What happened?”

Nancy’s voice wavered. “In the middle of an air raid? What do you think happened?”

“Amazing,” the Doctor breathed.
“What is?”

He almost smiled. “1941. Right now, not very far from here, the German war machine is rolling up the map of Europe. Country after country, falling like dominoes. Nothing can stop it. Nothing. Until one, tiny, damp little island says no. No. Not here.” He was aware of Nancy staring at him in shock but kept going. “A mouse in front of a lion. You’re amazing, the lot of you. Don’t know what you do to Hitler, but you frighten the hell out of me. Off you go then do what you’ve got to do. Save the world.”

The Doctor nodded towards the city. For a moment, he thought that Nancy might have been smiling a little. The Doctor was almost proud to manage that. Still, there wasn’t time to linger on that. Whatever had fallen had drawn attention, and given how afraid Nancy and the other children were of the result of the object, he didn’t have time to waste.

Jack was testing her. His conversation was completely different than the way he normally talked. He was trying to gather information and learn more about Rose and the Doctor for whatever game he was playing. The ship smoothly sailed over London, heading for what Jack had told her was an old hospital that was under some kind of mysterious quarantine. He was in the pilot seat, and Rose was holding onto a handle a foot or so behind him.

“Do you know why?” Rose asked. “War is on, and they shut down a hospital in the middle of the London Blitz. I would have thought it was all hands on deck?”

“Not sure, probably some kind of outbreak. This is before a lot of vaccines.” He didn’t sound worried, but there was a hint of something in his voice. Curiosity maybe. Rose hated not being able to tell. “Any idea what would lure your partner there?”

“Well, he was looking for that ship you’re looking to sell us. Must be a connection to the hospital.”

“No way,” Jack said firmly. “Anyway, this partner of yours, what’s he like?”

“He does like to wander off,” Rose agreed, but she noted Jack’s reaction. She wasn’t sure if Jack would have heard of the Doctor or Time Lords at this point. It seemed strange that he wouldn’t have, but the Time War had many unexpected results. “He goes by the Doctor,” she finally said.
“Good man, but a bit grumpy if you catch him at a bad time.”

“The Doctor,” Jack repeated. He was searching his memory but didn’t seem to come up with anything. “That’s a bit different but fair enough. Goodness knows, plenty of agents have code names.” He looked over his shoulder at Rose. “Do you?”

“Thorn.”


“It does the trick,” Rose agreed.

“So this Doctor, been working with him long?”

“We’ve been partnered about a year and a half, I think, but we’ve known each other a long time. He was a bit of a mentor to me at one point, not that he’d be happy to hear it described as such.”

Jack laughed a little, a bit more real this time. Rose had a strong urge to pull out her phone and call the older Jack. It would have been nice to hear his open affection and familiar teasing. She wished that she could reassure him that she loved him. But for now, she had to navigate around this younger and more guarded Jack.

“Don’t pressure him about the sale,” Rose said quickly. “He’s in this more for the exploration and will take offense. Let me give him the offer. I know how to entice him.”

“It’s a good offer,” Jack said. “Chula warships can’t be found anymore. It’s computer banks and records are all intact. There’s a wealth of information to be unlocked. For the right price.”

And he was back to salesman mode. Rose almost sighed. The ship stopped, and Jack stood up. “We’re here. I’m sorry, but the teleport is set to me. We’ll have to slide down.”

“Oh, lovely.”
“It’s easier the second time.” Jack’s smile was a bit softer, and Rose nodded her agreement.

“If I faint again, you must never bring it up.”

At that, Jack outright laughed.

………………..

Striding forward with purpose, the Doctor used the sonic screwdriver to open the padlock on the ornate metal gates of the hospital grounds. They were old fashioned, probably at least a hundred years old, but thankfully didn’t squeak too much. Ahead of him, the hospital loomed like a dark foreboding figure.

He really hoped that the doctor he was going to see had a real name. It had been too recently that he encountered another version of himself and he didn’t fancy doing that again. He had no memory of this place so it would have to be future and he didn’t want to see his future. That thought almost made him pause. For a long time after the war, he’d been convinced that he didn’t have a future at all.

The Doctor knew the reason for the change, and a sigh escaped him. Of course, paradoxically, she was also why he was afraid of his future. Rose had promised to stay, not even Pompeii had driven her away, but someday she’d be gone. He didn’t want to see that or even think about it. Pushing those thoughts out of his head, he headed up into the hospital, following the lights and searching for Nancy’s doctor.

He entered a long dark ward. Every bed was occupied by an unmoving patient that was wearing a gas mask. As if that wasn’t disturbing enough, they were all silent. There was no noise, no soft whispers, or even groans — none of the noises you expected from a hospital. Then an elderly man leaning on a walking stick tottered into view. The Doctor knew it wasn’t a Time Lord or another version of himself and relaxed a little despite the strange sight around him.

“You’ll find them everywhere,” the elderly man said. “In every bed, in every ward. Hundreds of them.”

“Yes, I saw. Why are they still wearing gas masks?”
“They’re not. Who are you?”

“I’m-er. Are you the doctor?” the Doctor asked uneasily.

“Doctor Constantine,” the man replied patiently. “And you are?”

“Nancy sent me,” he answered honestly.

“Nancy? That means you must’ve been asking about the bomb.”

“Yes.”

“What do you know about it?” Constantine asked. He seemed a touch suspicious.

“Nothing. Why I was asking. What do you know?”

“Only what it’s done,” Constantine answered.

“These people,” the Doctor gestured around. “They were all caught up in the blast?”

“None of them were.” Constantine chuckled at his own words only to start coughing. Waving off the Doctor, he sat down in a chair beside the desk. The Doctor noted that normally a ward sister would be there, but there was only Constantine.

“You’re very sick,” the Doctor said.

“Dying, I should think,” Constantine answered. That explained why he was here alone. Must have been the only one willing. “I just haven’t been able to find the time. Are you a doctor?”

“I have my moments.”
“Have you examined any of them yet?”

“No.”

“Don’t touch the flesh,” Constantine said as permission and warning.

“Which one?”

“Anyone.”

Uncertain of what was going on, the Doctor pulled out the sonic screwdriver. Constantine didn’t even ask what it was, either too tired or too beyond caring at this point. Pointing it at the nearest patient, the Doctor focused on the soft pulse of the screwdriver in his hand as it fed him information.

“Conclusions?” Constantine asked.

“Massive head trauma, mostly to the left side. Partial collapse of the chest cavity, mostly to the right. There’s some scarring on the back of the hand, and the gas mask seems to be fused to the flesh, but I can’t see any burns.” The Doctor stepped closer to the patient with a frown but did not try to touch them.

“Examine another one,” Constantine said.

The Doctor did so. His eyes widened in shock and alarm. “This isn’t possible.”

“Examine another,” Constantine urged.

He used the sonic screwdriver to check another patient only to receive the exact same results. Then he did another and another; all came back the exact same way. He’d have been worried that the sonic screwdriver was malfunctioning, but Constantine wasn’t surprised at all.
“This isn’t possible,” the Doctor repeated. He was at a loss for words.

“No.”

“They’ve all got the same injuries.”

“Yes.”

“Exactly the same.”

“Yes.”

“Identical, all of them, right down to the scar on the back of the hand,” the Doctor said. Then his eyes landed on Constantine’s hand. The man had the same scar on his hand. He didn’t want to ask. “How did this happen? How did it start?”

“When that bomb dropped, there was just one victim,” Constantine answered.

“Dead?”

“At first. His injuries were truly dreadful. By the following morning, every doctor and nurse who had treated him, who had touched him, had those exact same injuries. By the morning after that, every patient in the same ward, the exact same injuries,” Constantine explained calmly as if what he was saying wasn’t impossible. “Within a week, the entire hospital. Physical injuries as plague. Can you explain that? What would you say was the cause of death?”

“The head trauma.”

“No.”

“Asphyxiation.”
“The collapse of the chest cavity,” the Doctor guessed. He was grasping at straws and trying to understand what Constantine was getting at.

“No.”

“All right. What was the cause of death?”

“There wasn’t one. They’re not dead.” With that, Constantine hit a nearby metal wastebasket. The loud sound made all of the patients sit up in the beds. The Doctor jumped back and looked around in alarm. “It’s all right. They’re harmless. They just sort of sit there. No heartbeat, no life signs of any kind. They just don’t die.”

“And they’ve just been left here?” the Doctor asked. “Nobody’s doing anything?”

“I try and make them comfortable. What else is there?”

This was over the head of the humans. The Doctor had to admit that. This plague didn’t fit anything they knew about sickness and disease, and with the war on, there was a limit to what resources could be poured into solving it. Given what Rose had told him about Torchwood, he was surprised that they weren’t sniffing around. Then again, one of the patients very well could have been a Torchwood agent. In their current state, none of them were in any condition to be answering questions.

“Just you? You’re the only one here?” the Doctor asked.

“Before this war began, I was a father and a grandfather. Now I am neither. But I’m still a doctor.”

“Yeah. I know the feeling,” the Doctor muttered.

Constantine grimaced and shifted in his chair, clearly uncomfortable. He was breathing a little harder now. “I suspect the plan is to blow up the hospital and blame it on a German bomb.”
“Probably too late,” the Doctor said. His eyes were fixed on Constantine.

“No. There are isolated cases. Isolated cases breaking out all over London,” Constantine forced out. The Doctor took a step towards him. “Stay back, stay back,” Constantine ordered. “Listen to me. Top floor. Room eight oh two. That’s where they took the first victim, the one from the crash site. And you must find Nancy again.”

“Nancy?”

Constantine’s whole body was shaking. The man was struggling to keep talking, but somehow, he managed. “It was her brother. She knows more than she’s saying. She won’t tell me, but she might Mummy. Are you my mummy?”

The Doctor stood stunned as Constantine’s mouth began to shift. The flesh grew and warped, forming the start of a gas mask. Within moments, his whole face had been shifted into a full gas mask, making him the latest victim.

“Hello?” a male voice called from the hallway.

“Hello?” Rose called.

The Doctor was almost dizzy with relief at the sound of Rose’s voice. He didn’t know the male one and didn’t care. Constantine stayed sitting in his chair. The newly transformed man made no move to attack him. He just sat there and watched. Pointing the sonic screwdriver at him, the Doctor checked the symptoms quickly. Suddenly the old man’s body was registering as exactly the same as all the other patients. Shaking his head, the Doctor put away the sonic screwdriver and headed out of the ward to find Rose.
Looking around the deserted hospital, it was all Rose could do not to shift closer to Jack. This place looked like something out of a horror movie, and after everything that she’d seen, Rose’s imagination was a bit too good at scaring her. The old fashioned lights flickered every few minutes, making the shadows in the corners warp and twist. Her heart was beating a little too fast, and the natural creaking of the walls wasn’t helping matters.

Still, she had to be careful with this Jack. Rather than seeing her relying on her brother, he’d see someone flirting with him and that was the last thing she wanted. He didn’t know her. He wouldn’t understand. They didn’t have their relationship yet, not really. Rose didn’t mind needing to build it, but she wasn’t sure how to start.

Rose hated needing to tiptoe around Jack. Maybe she should just tell him that they’d met out of order, but this didn’t seem like the time. She promised herself that she would find a good time to have that conversation. Hopefully, after she talked with his future self and cleared some things with him. Her life was so confusing.

“He’s got to be around here somewhere,” Rose said. “Doctor?” she called softly. “Hello?”

Then the Doctor stepped out into the corridor ahead of Rose. She smiled but didn’t move to hug him despite the desire to. He looked thoughtfully, and the Doctor quickly checked her over before his eyes jumped over to Jack. Rose could almost see the “pretty boy” thoughts rising in his head and a jealous barb on his tongue. She really hoped this wasn’t Sherwood all over again.

“Good evening. Hope we're not interrupting,” Jack said smoothly. He stepped forward and took the Doctor’s hand to shake it. “Jack Harkness. I've been hearing all about you on the way over.”
“He’s the one who brought that mauve alert item here,” Rose said. “He knows about us being Time Agents.” She met the Doctor’s eyes as she said the last part.

“And it’s a real pleasure to meet you, Doctor,” Jack added. He gave the Doctor one more smile, glanced at Rose, and headed into the ward. Theoretically, Rose knew that he was giving her privacy to start putting his case to the Doctor.

“Hey, you,” Rose greeted softly. She moved closer to the Doctor. “You alright? Anything happen?”

“I’m fine. Looks like you’ve been busy.”

“A bit.”

“Where’ve you been? We’re in the middle of a London Blitz. It’s not a good time for a stroll.”

“Who’s strolling?” Rose countered. “I went by barrage balloon. Only way to see an air raid.”

“What?” Horror and worry filled the Doctor’s voice.

“I’m fine,” Rose said. “But what is a Chula warship?”

“Chula?”

“Yeah, Jack has a scout ship or something, but he says that he’s also got a fully armed Chula Warship. He’s looking to sell it to the Time Agency.”

The Doctor frowned and headed into the ward with Rose on his heels. Jack was using his wrist device to check one of the patients. The look on his face was a new one to Rose, a bit of shock mixed with suspicion and fear.
“This just isn’t possible,” Jack said. “How did this happen?” He was looking at them as if he expected them to have an answer.

“What kind of Chula ship landed here?” the Doctor asked Jack.

“What?” Jack blinked in confusion.

“He said it was a warship,” Rose said. She walked through the ward slowly, creeped out by the silent figures. “He stole it, parked it somewhere out there, somewhere a bomb’s going to fall on it unless we make him an offer.”

“What kind of warship?” the Doctor pressed. “What type? Why technology was on it?”

“Does it matter?” Jack huffed. “It’s got nothing to do with this.”

“This started at the bomb site. It’s got everything to do with it. What kind of warship?”

Frustration and worry filled Jack’s face. She saw the moment that he gave up. “An ambulance!” Jack snapped. He brought up his wrist. “Look.”

A hologram appeared in the air beside Jack’s wrist device. It was more of a tube than anything that Rose would have thought was some kind of ship. “That’s what you chased through the Time Vortex. It’s space junk. I wanted to kid you it was valuable. It’s empty. I made sure of it,” Jack said. There was a bit of sweat on his forehead, and she could feel his desperation radiating off of him. It was distracting. “Nothing but a shell. I threw it at you. Saw your time travel vehicle, love the retro look, by the way, nice panels. Threw you the bait-”

“Bait?” Rose frowned at the word choice.

“I wanted to sell it to you and then destroy it before you found out it was junk.”

“So it was a con,” Rose said. She knew that she shouldn’t be disappointed in him, but she was.
“Yes, it was a con. I was conning you. That's what I am; I'm a con man!” Jack tossed his hands up in agitation. Then he took a breath and focused his gaze on her and the Doctor. “I thought you were Time Agents. You're not, are you.”

“Just a couple more freelancers.”

“Oh. Should have known. The way you guys are blending in with the local colour. I mean, Flag Girl was bad enough, but U-Boat Captain?”

“We were having a day at home.” Rose shrugged.

“Anyway, whatever's happening here has got nothing to do with that ship,” Jack finished.

“What is happening here, Doctor?” Rose asked as she studied one of the prone figures.

“Human DNA is being rewritten by an idiot.” The Doctor was glaring at Jack.

“I need a bit more than that,” Rose said.

“I don't know. Some kind of virus converting human beings into these things.” The Doctor gestured in frustration to the people on the beds. “But why? What's the point?”

“Can we undo it?” Rose pressed. “Use a retrovirus to deliver a CRISPR packager or something?”

“That would be ideal. We need to return their DNA to how it should be,” the Doctor agreed. He nodded to Rose and almost smiled. It was always nice when his companions caught on fast. Given that Rose had studied computers and physics, he was surprised that she knew what CRISPR was. “The issue is that without a clear understanding of what caused this, I can’t be sure that a DNA package can be set to restore them. It could make everything worse. Clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic repeats are DNA sequences that target specific sections of the DNA.” He shook his head. “I wouldn’t know what to target.”

“It’s World War II,” Rose sighed. “This isn’t supposed to be a problem.”
“No, but if it keeps spreading, then what you know as the human race isn’t to going survive the war.”

………………..

Nancy slipped back into the Lloyd’s house, telling herself that there was still plenty of time for her to raid their kitchen. A year ago, there would have been a crushing wave of guilt, but now there wasn’t even a flicker. They had plenty. In fact, given the state of their waistlines, she was doing them a favor. She started gathering the remains of the meal that she and the others had run off on as she reviewed the most likely places for the children to be sleeping tonight.

It was cold, which narrowed the possibilities. News got around fast of the best places to sleep safe and warm. She expected that when she got there, the children would be curled up together like puppies. The thought was bittersweet as she drifted back to simpler and happier times. Then the radio beside her switched on making Nancy freeze.

“Please, mummy. Please let me in. I'm scared of the bombs, mummy. Please, mummy.” The child’s voice called to her. The front door closed. “Mummy. Mummy.” This time the voice wasn’t coming from the radio.

Nancy dove under the table and held her breath. Familiar shoes came into the view as the child walked into the dining room from the hallway.

“Mummy? Where's my mummy? Mummy?”

An apple hit the floor, and Nancy moved. The child bent down to pick the apple up, and Nancy scrambled for the door. Behind her, the child pointed at the door, and it slammed shut hard enough to rattle the walls. Nancy frantically tried the knob, but it wouldn’t move.

“Are you my mummy?”

………………..

At Albion Hospital, Rose was trying to split her attention between the scowling Jack and the
Doctor. Both of them were trying to figure out the puzzle before them without talking to each other. It was foolish, and Rose had the nagging sense that she was missing something. Her eyes moved across the row of beds thoughtfully. Suddenly, the patients all sat up as one.

“Mummy. Mummy. Mummy? Mummy?” the patients called. They all spoke as one, like a hive mind or the creepy thing the Silver Lord had caused at Torchwood.

“What triggered this?” Rose searched the room for anything that had changed, but she didn’t see any new stimulus.

“I don't know,” the Doctor said.

“Mummy,” the patients called. “Mummy.”

“Don't let them touch you,” the Doctor said.

The three of them were crowding back in the ward, trying to stay away from the slow-moving horde. Rose’s mind jumped to zombies, and she swallowed, trying to contain the jolt of fear in her chest.

“What happens if they touch us?” Rose asked.

“You're looking at it,” the Doctor said.


Nancy’s eyes were burning with unshed tears. Panic and guilt tore at her throat like starving wolves. The child was moving closer to her in slow, measured steps. Regret filled her chest, but there was nothing she could do.

“Mummy?” he asked.

“It’s me. Nancy!”
“Are you my mummy?”

That question haunted her. She didn’t know why he’d started asking. He was so young. What had put the idea into his head? Now he kept asking, over and over again as he followed her, begging her for an answer that would mean nothing to a corpse.

“Are you my mummy?”

“It’s Nancy, your sister.”

The lie was ash on her tongue. She didn’t know why she was still lying. Habit. It had been drummed into her. They’d told everyone that she’d gone to help her aging grandmother in the north. In truth, her grandmother had passed a few years before, but the neighbors didn’t know that. There had been looks, the sort of looks that a young woman who went away for a time always got.

Everyone had known. They’d all known, but for the sake of priority and her reputation, they all pretended they didn’t. Now that her parents were gone and buried, someone must have said something. Something to make him wonder.

“Mummy.” He stepped closer.

“You’re dead, Jamie. You’re dead!” Nancy screamed.

“Mummy,” was all Jamie said. “Mummy.”

………………

In the ward, the Doctor put his arm in front of Rose, shielding her even as he acknowledged that it would buy her seconds at best. She kept shifting, and he imagined that the urge to summon her sword and fight back must be strangling her. But it wasn’t their fault. He studied them, trying to get some clue, but they were humans in strange gasmasks. It didn’t make sense. None of this was going to make sense, and all he could do was try to think of a way out of this ward before he and Rose were touched and converted.

Why that word? The Doctor wondered. Why the fixation on the mother? Where had the question come from? What was this plague? Then he stopped thinking so clearly as the victims crowded in closer and closer, caging him and the others against the wall with nowhere to go.
The patients were almost within touching distance, their hands extending towards Jack, Rose, and the Doctor. Rose summoned her sword and turned to inspect the wall. There had to a place that she could cut through. There wasn’t much time, but maybe-

“Go to your room,” the Doctor said sternly. It was an unfamiliar tone, unnatural to him, and the words were unexpected. “Go to your room,” the Doctor repeated. “I mean it. I’m very, very angry with you. I am very, very cross. Go to your room!”

Rose spun around, barely remembering to release her sword, so she didn’t hurt Jack or the Doctor. The patients were hanging the heads in shame. The Doctor was pointing dramatically into the distance, and though she couldn’t see his face, she could imagine the stern expression. For a moment, nothing happened. Then to her great surprise, the patients began to shuffle away. Rose opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

“I’m glad that worked,” the Doctor said, relief clear in his voice. “Those would have been terrible last words.”

Rose couldn’t help it; a soft laugh escaped her. Jack chuckled weakly, still appearing more than a little shocked at what had just happened. Even the Doctor seemed to need a moment to catch his breath. Rose took a deep breath and held it for a moment. The Doctor stepped away from the wall and glanced one more time towards the door.

They followed the patients back into the war cautiously and watched from the doorway as they all sat back down on their beds and laid out. It was as if they’d never marched at them. Moving over to one of the patients, Rose sank down onto her knees beside the bed and looked at the poor thing. Judging from the clothing, it was a female nurse. Probably someone who had been trying to help only to be overtaken by this plague. Even this close, she couldn’t see clearly that it was breathing.
The gas mask grew out of her skin in a terrible parody of the protective device, and it was utterly unmoving. There was just nothing, and yet they could all stand and move like some sort of hive mind.

Jack slumped into the office chair and put his feet up on the desk. He was recovering his cool, but Rose knew him well enough to see the lines of tension around his eyes. Still, it was nothing compared to the storm brewing in the Doctor.

“How was your con supposed to work?” the Doctor asked Jack.

“Simple enough, really.” Jack said. “Find some harmless piece of space junk, let the nearest Time Agent track it back to Earth, convince him it’s valuable, name a price. When he’s put fifty percent upfront, oops!” Jack gestured with his hands and smiled. “A German bomb falls on it, destroys it forever. He never gets to see what he’s paid for; never knows he’s been had. I buy him a drink with his own money, and we discuss dumb luck. The perfect self-cleaning con.”

“Yeah. Perfect.” There was a dangerous note in the Doctor’s voice, and Rose couldn’t help the way of disappointment in Jack that washed over her.

“The London Blitz is great for self-cleaners. Pompeii’s nice if you want to make a vacation of it though, but you’ve got to set your alarm for volcano day.” Jack started to laugh, but the sound was forced.

Rose did flinch now, and the Doctor glared at Jack. Swallowing, Rose pushed away the horrible memory of pulling that lever at Pompeii. Jacki’s smile fell away as she looked at him.

“Don’t talk about Pompeii,” Rose said softly. “We were there… it wasn’t what you think it was.”

“I- I’m sorry,” Jack said. His charming exterior melted away for an instant, letting Rose see the deep worry in his eyes. Strangely, his regret over her pain made her feel better.

“Take a look around the room,” the Doctor snapped. He touched Rose’s hand gently even as he glared at Jack. “This is what your harmless piece of space-junk did.”

“It was a burnt-out medical transporter. It was empty!” Jack insisted.
“Rose.” The Doctor started moving.

“What’s the plan?” she asked, falling into step beside him.

“We’re going upstairs.”

“I even programmed the flight computer so it wouldn’t land on anything living. I harmed no-one,” Jack said. There was a note of desperation in his voice. She didn’t know if he wanted to be believed or wanted it to be true more. “I don’t know what’s happening here, but believe me, I had nothing to do with it.”

“I’ll tell you what’s happening.” The Doctor turned in the doorway to face Jack. “You forgot to set your alarm clock. It’s volcano day.”

A siren sounded in the distance, ringing across the city. “What’s that?” Rose asked.

“The all clear,” Jack answered.

“I wish,” the Doctor scoffed.

Jack gave Rose a look. She could see the questions churning in his mind and gave him a tiny nod. She heard him on the stairs behind her and the Doctor. A sense of rightness began to settle in place. He wasn’t bolting. That was a good sign and made her feel a lot better about the situation.

“Rose? Doctor?” Jack called.

The Doctor was ahead of Rose now and leaned over the railing of the stairs to look at Jack.

“Have you got a blaster?” the Doctor asked.

“Sure!” Jack grinned and charged up the stairs after her and the Doctor.
The Doctor moved towards a heavy metal door, the sort that didn’t look like it should be opened. Rose was certain that they were going to open it. Jack came up beside her and the Doctor, appearing more comfortable now that he was being asked to contribute.

“The night your space-junk landed, someone was hurt,” the Doctor explained. “This was where they were taken.”

“What happened?” Rose asked.

“Let’s find out,” the Doctor said to her. Then he glanced at Jack and gestured at the door. “Get it open.”

Rose shifted closer to the Doctor. “What’s wrong with your sonic screwdriver?” She asked softly.

“Nothing.” The Doctor had crossed his arms and was waiting for Jack.

With a small smile, Jack pulled out a blaster and fired at the lock. To Rose’s surprise, it cut a square hole in the door. It was much faster than her sword. If she’d know about that earlier when the patients had been coming, she would have used that as an escape tool.

“Sonic blaster, fifty-first century,” the Doctor said. He was eyeing Jack’s blaster with a small smirk. “Weapon Factories of Villengard?”

“You’ve been to the factories?” Jack asked with a hint of surprise.

“Once.”

Rose heard something in that answer and wondered just what had happened.

“Well, they’re gone now, destroyed,” Jack said. There was her answer. “The main reactor went critical. Vaporized the lot.”
“Like I said. Once. There’s a banana grove there, now.” The Doctor smiled at Rose, and she almost laughed. “I like bananas. Bananas are good.” That did draw a chuckled out of her while Jack struggled with confusion.

They stepped into the room, and Rose’s good humour evaporated. It was a fairly small space filled with filing cabinets and electronic equipment with an observation room that looked into a smaller room that had a simple bed. Everything was wrecked. The machine had been torn up and lay in bits across the floor. Files were scattered, and some of the cabinets hung open. Worst was the smashed observation window. It painted a picture that Rose didn’t like.

“What do you think?” the Doctor asked.

It was Jack that answered. “Something got out of here.”

“Yeah. And?”

“Something powerful. Angry.”

Rose walked forward and looked into the smaller room. There were crayon drawings that were clearly from a child scattered on the floor. They showed a figure with long hair that Rose assumed was the mummy. There was also a discarded teddy bear which made Rose grimace. All along the lower half of the walls were more drawings of the child and the woman.

“It was a child,” Rose said.

The Doctor and Jack came up behind her to look in. “A child? I suppose this explains Mummy.”

“But how could a child do all this?” Rose gestured around the room. Jack walked into the small room to join her, looking around with wide eyes.

The Doctor moved something behind her, and Rose turned to investigate. He was standing right in front of the broken observation window. He hit a button, and a recording began to play. Rose glanced nervously at Jack, who looked just as uncomfortable.
“Do you know where you are?” a male asked.

“Doctor Constantine,” the Doctor said softly. “He was looking after them.”

“Are you my mummy?” the child asked.

“Are you aware of what’s around you?” Doctor Constantine asked. “Can you see?”

“Are you my mummy?”

“What do you want? Do you know—”


“Doctor, I’ve heard this voice before,” Rose said softly. She moved closer to the Doctor, unable to ignore the chill working its way up her spine.

“Me too.”

“Mummy?”

“Always are you my mummy,” Rose observed. “He’s asking like he truly doesn’t know.”

“Mummy?”

“How could he not know?” Rose asked. She wasn’t expecting an answer.

“Are you there, mummy? Mummy?”
“Can you sense it?” the Doctor asked. He joined them in the child’s room, pacing around the edge with agitation filling his face.

“Sense what?” Jack asked.

“Coming out of the walls,” the Doctor pressed. He looked towards Rose, who frowned. She didn’t feel anything. “Can you feel it?”

“Mummy?” the child’s voice called.

“Funny little human brains. How do you get around in those things?”

“Doctor, this isn’t the time to insult species,” Rose said. “I don’t sense anything. Should I-”

“No, don’t lower your shields,” the Doctor ordered. “And I’m thinking. I’ll insult if I want.”

Rolling her eyes, Rose smiled a little at Jack. “He insults species when he’s stressed. When he cuts himself shaving, he does half an hour on life forms he’s cleverer than.”

“I’m not sure to respond to that,” Jack said.

“There are these children living rough round the bomb sites,” the Doctor said. He stopped in front of the broken window to look at Rose and Jack. “They come out during air-raids looking for food.”

“Mummy, please?” the child asked.

“And one of them was near the crash site,” Rose said. “And it caused a physical change.”

“It was a med-ship. It was harmless,” Jack insisted.

“Yes, you keep saying harmless,” the Doctor scoffed. Then he turned to Rose. “Yes, they were
physically changed. They were altered by something. Whatever it was, it was intense and sudden. The doctor treating them changed in moments. His flesh formed the gas mask.” The Doctor shuddered.

“So not just a genetic change, but something that forced to be fast,” Rose said. “How? Killing the old cells off to force new ones to be created with the new DNA?”

The Doctor’s frown intensified, and Rose worried she’d gotten it a bit wrong. Her interest in genetics was limited. Mostly to wondering how her future children were even possible. But she knew enough to know that new DNA didn’t take hold that fast normally.

“I’m here!” A chipper child’s voice said.

Then Rose heard a strange whirring and slapping sound. It tugged at her memory, something from when she was small at her grandfather’s house. The Doctor’s expression was shifting rapidly, fear and confusion taking over once again.

“It’s afraid. Terribly afraid and powerful,” the Doctor said. “It doesn’t know it yet, but it will do. It’s got the power of a god, and I just sent it to its room.”

“Doctor?” Rose’s ears were focusing on the strange noise.

“I’m here. Can’t you see me?”

“What’s that noise?”

“End of the tape,” the Doctor said softly “It ran out about thirty seconds ago.”

“I’m here now. Can’t you see me?” the child’s voice asked.

Rose knew what it all meant. Her brain put it together, and she could see the dread on the Doctor’s face, but she didn’t want to react. That would make it real.
“I sent it to its room. This is its room.”

The Doctor spun around, revealing the small figure behind him. Rose tensed, sucking in an alarmed breath. It was the little boy from the roof. She was suddenly very grateful that the balloon had gone sailing off. It hadn’t, and he had touched her-

“Are you my mummy?” the child seemed to be looking right at her. “Mummy?”

She wanted to answer the child, to tell it that she wasn’t his mother, but then what would it do. The Doctor moved back closer to her, standing protectively in front of her. Jack suddenly moved beside her.

“Okay, on my signal make for the door,” Jack ordered.

“Mummy?”

Jack pulled out his blaster and aimed it over the Doctor’s shoulder. It was a banana and Rose almost cursed. She caught a smile appearing on the Doctor’s face, but thankfully he didn’t glory in his small victory. The Doctor pulled Jack’s blaster from his belt and aimed at the wall. With a whirl, there was suddenly a large square hole in the wall.

“Go now!” the Doctor shouted. Rose leapt through the hole. “Don’t drop the banana!”

“Why not?” Jack asked, following Rose through the hole.

“Good source of potassium!”

“Give me that!” Jack grabbed back his blaster.

The child had walked into his room and was approaching the opening in the wall. “Mummy. I want my mummy.”

Using his blaster, Jack repaired the hole in the wall, making it as if it had never happened.
Breathing out, Jack smiled and held up the blaster. “Digital rewind,” he explained. “Nice switch.” He tossed the banana back to the Doctor.

“It’s from the groves of Villengard. I thought it was appropriate.”

“There’s really a banana grove in the heart of Villengard, and you did that?”

“Bananas are good,” the Doctor answered with a smile.

But there was no time to bask in their escape. The wall in front of them began to crack. Rose shouted a warning, and the Doctor grabbed her hand. They ran to the right, following the hallways towards another door around a corner. But the doorway opened, and patients began to march through chanting their call for Mummy.

“Come on!” The Doctor spun them around, and Jack took the lead going the other direction.

More patients were coming from that way. They skidded to a stop back where they’d started. The crack was growing as the child fought his way through. They were pinned down.
The voices were all one as the horde of gas mask zombies approached. They moved slowly, calling for their mother as the wall cracked more and more with each passing moment.

“It’s keeping us here till it can get at us,” the Doctor said. His voice was breathy with fear, and the three of them huddled close together with Rose in the middle.

“It’s controlling them?” Jack asked, frantically.

“It is them,” the Doctor said. “It’s every living thing in this hospital.”

“Okay. This can function as a sonic blaster, a sonic cannon, and as a triple-enfolded sonic disrupter.” Jack had his blaster at the ready, but couldn’t decide which group to point it at. “Doc, what you got?”

“I’ve got a sonic, er. Oh, never mind.”

“What?” Jack asked.

Rose was eyeing the wall behind them, trying to remember which floor they were on. At least third. She was scared enough that she could probably cut through the wall, but the child would just follow them down when they jumped. It would likely survive better than them.

“It’s sonic, okay? Let’s leave it at that.”


“It’s sonic! Totally sonic! I am soniced up!”

“A sonic what?!”

“Screwdriver!” the Doctor finally answered in a huff.

The wall gave way ahead of them, revealing the child. Down, Rose’s mind stayed fixed on that thought, but she had a better idea now. Rose grabbed Jack’s arm and pulled it down. As soon as his blaster was aimed at the ground, Rose hit his finger on the trigger. It went off, and the floor beneath them vanished. They hit the floor below. Jack scrambled to his feet and thankfully didn’t need Rose’s prompting to use the rewind feature to seal the floor. Rose stood up, grateful to still be herself and reviewed the feeling of her body. She was going to feel that escape tomorrow, but no broken bones immediately caught her attention.

The room was dark, almost pitch black despite the raid being over and she started searching for the edges of the room to find a light switch. Her legs bumped into something, but thankfully it didn’t make much noise.

“Doctor, are you okay?” Rose asked.

“Could’ve used a warning.”

“I’ll keep that in mind next time I save your life.”

“Who has a sonic screwdriver?” Jack asked.

“I do.”
“Lights,” Rose said as she kept searching. It was also a not so subtle hint to the men to look.

“Who looks at a screwdriver and thinks, ooo, this could be a little more sonic?” Jack asked.

“What, you’ve never been bored?”

Rose moved over to the small desk at the side of the room. It at least had a small table lamp on it. “There’s got to be a light switch.”

“Never had a long night? Never had a lot of cabinets to put up?” the Doctor huffed.

Rose finally found the switch and flipped it on. As the light filled the room, it revealed rows of beds with even more patients with gas mask facings resting. They sat up as one.

“Mummy,” they chanted. “Mummy.”

“Door.” Jack gestured to a nearby doorway.

They tried to open it, but it was locked. Jack pointed his blaster at the door, but nothing happened. The patients were rising from their beds.

“Damn it!”

“Mummy.”

“It’s the special features. They really drain the battery,” Jack explained.

Rose was reaching for her sonic pen, but the Doctor was ahead of her. There was a soft whirl from the sonic screwdriver, and the door opened. The Doctor held it open, ushering her and Jack inside. It was a small room, dark and filled with cabinets and shelves, but it didn’t seem like a true storeroom. It was filled with random odds and ends, and nothing was labeled. Rose found a light
and switched in on, revealing a window on the far side of the room, but it was barred.

“Battery?” Rose asked. That surprised her, the sonic pen and sonic screwdriver never ran out of a charge. The one time she’d asked about it, the Doctor had given her a lecture about ambient energy harvesting and sound to energy conversion cells. “Just a battery?”

Jack leapt onto a large built-in seat below the small barred window. “I was going to send for another one, but somebody’s got to blow up the factory.” He glared at the Doctor.

“He does that,” Rose said cheerfully. The tension was getting to be a bit much. “And he’s very good at it.”

“Okay,” the Doctor said, coming over to join Rose. “That door should hold it for a bit.”

“The door?” Jack stared at the Doctor. “The wall didn’t stop it!”

“Well, it’s got to find us first!” The Doctor gestured around the room. “Come on; we’re not done yet! Assets, assets!”

Jack came down from the window and dropped himself into an old rocking chair. “Well, I’ve got a banana, and in a pinch, you could put up some shelves.”

“Window,” the Doctor said.

“Barred. Sheer drop outside. Seven stories.”

Rose grimaced at that. Apparently not cutting through the wall had been the right call after all. “No other exits,” Rose said. She nodded towards the walls. “Not unless we want to risk exposing ourselves. I don’t know the layout of the building.”

“Emergency exit only then,” the Doctor said.

“Well, the assets conversation went in a flash, didn’t it?” Jack said. He was looking at Rose
curiously.

“So, where’d you pick this one up, then?” the Doctor asked Rose in a huff. “Another bridge fight?”

It really was Sherwood all over again. “Doctor,” Rose scolded.

“She was hanging from a barrage balloon; I had an invisible spaceship. I never stood a chance.”

Rose felt her cheeks warm while Jack smirked at her, and the Doctor seemed to struggle for what to say.

“We need to get out of here,” the Doctor said. “Rose, let’s check the walls-”

“Doctor,” Rose interrupted. Jack was gone, he’d vanished in a small flash of light. “Jack’s gone.”

Nancy had to keep moving. Her tears had all dried up, but the memory of the dining room and Jamie taunted her. The bag of food and tools that she’d taken from the Lloyds weighed heavily on her back. Blackmailing the man about his relationship had left a bitter taste in her mouth despite how vile the man had acted. Children starving in London and living in the rough and his family eating like kings. Shaking her head, Nancy pushed the thought away. There were more important things to worry about than that bully.

She made her way to the empty house that the children had used last night. It was a mess, but better than being outside. Nancy didn’t know where the folks who lived here were; they’d probably run off. As she approached, she heard soft voices inside and scowled. Jim was playing with a typewriter when she entered.

“Thought as much. What are all of you doing here? Different house every night, I told you,” Nancy scolded.

“We thought you were dead, or you’d run off,” Jim said.
“I didn’t,” Ernie chimed in. “I knew you’d come back for us.”

Nancy emptied her sake of loot and started handing it out. Jim stayed at the typewriter, pressing the keys randomly.

“Found that old thing in the junk,” Ernie said. “Thinks he can write now-”

“I’m writing a letter to me dad.”

“You don’t even know where your dad is,” Ernie argued. “And how’re you going to send it?”

“I don’t know, stick it in an envelope?” Jim said.

“You can’t even read or write.”

“I don’t need to. I’ve got a machine.” Jim started hitting the keys at rapid speed, and Nancy flinched.

“Will you stop making that noise!” Everyone in the stopped, looking at her in shock and alarm. “I’m sorry, Jim,” Nancy said more gently. “On you go. You write a letter to your dad if you want to.”

“I know we should’ve went somewhere else, but we need you, see, for the thinking,” Ernie told her. He wasn’t exactly smiling, but looking up at her hopefully.

“And what if I wasn’t here? What if one night, I didn’t come back for you?” Nancy pulled the tool from the bag. Jim slipped out of the chair to sit beside Ernie. “There’s a war on. People go out they don’t always come back. It happens. What would you do then?”

“They’re wire cutters,” Ernie said.
“I need you to think about that,” Nancy insisted. To her right, the typing continued softly. “Someone’s got to look after this lot.”


“The bomb site. The one at the railway station.”

“Why?”

“The child. That’s where he was killed. That’s where it all started. And I’m going to find out how.” Nancy was amazed that her voice didn’t shake.

“He’ll get you, and then he’ll come for us,” Ernie protested. “He always comes for us.”

“No. Ernie, he doesn’t. He always comes after me.” Nancy looked down at the boys, sadly. “There are things I haven’t told you. Things I can’t tell you. As long as you’re with me, you’re in danger. Even now, sitting here, you’re in danger because of me.”

“You’re the one what keeps us safe.”

“You think so, Ernie? Then answer this. Jim is sitting there right next to you. So who’s typing?”

There was a collective gasp. Nancy reached over and snatched the paper out.

“Is he coming?” Ernie asked softly.

“Ernie, as long as you’re with me, he’s always coming.” She tossed down the paper, letting it drift to the ground. “Plenty of greens. And chew your food.”

With that, Nancy left the house. The children stared after her until Ernie finally picked up the paper. Below Jim’s gibberish was Are You My Mummy. Mummy. It was typed over and over.
The Doctor turned around and glared at the empty chair. Then he moved to the wall and started carefully tapping on it. Rose was guessing he was trying to determine if there were occupied rooms on the other side. She flexed her wrist, ready to call her sword if necessary while her mind spun. Jack leaving them didn’t fit, it didn’t make sense-

A nearby old radio crackled to life. “Rose? Doctor? Can you hear me? I’m back on my ship.” The Doctor grabbed the radio and turned it, revealing a severed cord and gave Rose a thoughtful look that she didn’t know how to respond to. “Used the emergency teleport. Sorry I couldn’t take you,” Jack added. “It’s security-keyed to my molecular structure.”

“Right,” Rose sighed. “Right, of course.”

“I’m working on it,” Jack promised. He sounded truly sincere and worried. “Hang in there.”

“How’re you speaking to us?” the Doctor asked.

“Om-Com,” Jack answered through the radio. “I can call anything with a speaker grill.”

“Now there’s a coincidence,” the Doctor said.

“What is?” Jack asked.

“The child can Om-Com, too.”

“He can?” Rose frowned.

“Anything with a speaker grill. Even the Tardis phone.”

“What, you mean the child can phone us?”
“And I can hear you,” the child said, their voice coming through the radio. “Coming to find you. Coming to find you.”

“Doctor, can you hear that?” Jack asked.

“Loud and clear.”

“I’ll try to block out the signal,” Jack said. “Least I can do.”

“Coming to find you, mummy.”

“Remember this one, Rose?” Jack asked his tone a bit teasing.

Moonlight Serenade began to play, and Rose couldn’t help but smile a little. The Doctor turned to her with a slight frown. Shrugging, Rose leaned against the wall.

“Our song,” she said. “Apparently.”

The Doctor’s expression closed, and Rose sighed. There was too much going on for this. “Rose, we need to get out of here.”

“I’m not cutting through the walls,” Rose said. “We don’t know if there are more wards. The last thing we need is even more of them swarming us.”

“What about the bars? You could cut them?”

“And scale down with what?” Rose patted her shoulder bag. “I’m afraid that I don’t have a grappling hook in here.” She reached in and pulled out a small packet of Jammie Dodger biscuits. “If I start carrying much more, I’m going to need you to upgrade it to transdimensional.”

“Gets hard to find stuff,” the Doctor replied. He still sounded unhappy, but he took a biscuit. “We
can’t just sit here.”

“Look I know Jack can be a bit…” Rose trailed off and sighed. “Okay actually he’s a bit more irritating than he will be, but I promise you that at his core he’s a good man. He’s loyal, intelligent, adaptable, and funny.”

“You didn’t just meet him, did you?” the Doctor asked.

His face darkened, and Rose could sense the rising jealousy. He was always so possessive and yet wouldn’t do a damn thing about it. Reminding herself that this wasn’t the time, Rose pushed aside her frustration. She’d decided that their relationship had to wait until he was ready.

“No,” Rose admitted softly. “You’re not the only person I have a temporally complex relationship with. The first time I met Jack, he saved my life from one of the Silver Lord’s plots. I didn’t trust him at first, but he knew me. He knew all sorts of things about me and proceeded to put himself at risk to keep me safe.” Rose shrugged a little and chuckled. “And he pops up here and there sometimes just to have lunch and joke around and sometimes to help me in a crisis.” Giving the Doctor a wide smile she added, “Like I said he’s a good man, but sometimes it’s a lot easier to believe in yourself if someone else believes in you first.”

She could see the wheels turning in his head. Understanding took over his face followed by closed off pained resignation. Feeling alarm at the change, Rose straightened up. Something closed off in the Doctor’s eyes.

“Fine,” the Doctor sighed, but the tension in his shoulders was obvious. “I’ll give the future Mr. Rose Tyler a chance.”

“Wait, what?” Rose asked, half reeling back at the Doctor’s jealous grumble as she tried not to laugh. “Eww,” Rose squeaked, rolling up her nose which made the Doctor’s expression soften. “Uh yeah no, never gonna happen. Flirting with a guy who is sort of like my big brother is weird, but hey he isn’t actually my brother, and that’s just what Jack is like, but shagging him?” Rose allowed a full-body shudder to pass over her, which made the Doctor relax further. “Oh god, don’t even go there. Ewwww ewww ewww.” She shuddered again, and this time the Doctor did laugh, and Rose started to giggle. “Besides, I know his future significant other,” Rose whispered as if sharing a secret as she leaned closer to him. “Or others I suppose and wow do I not want to go there.” She gave him a tongue touched smile, watching happily as he smiled at her. “Someday you’ll find this conversation very funny.” Rose gave the Doctor a sheepish smile. “Jack flirts, and I’ve sorta just gotten in the habit of flirting back.”
“That’s a strange friendship.” The Doctor sounded amused now, his jealously having faded away.

“You and I really aren’t ones to talk about strange friendships,” Rose reminded him. “Anyway try to relax. Jack will get us out.”

The music filled the small room, providing a distraction from the knowledge that there were being hunted. The Doctor had climbed up on the ledge and was poking at the bars with the sonic screwdriver. She chuckled. It was telling that he hadn’t asked her to cut them.

“Trying to stay busy.”

“Have to do something,” the Doctor grumbled.

“So… let’s dance.” The idea sprang to her mind, and Rose held out her hand.

“Dance?” The Doctor’s tone was strange and didn’t turn to look at her.

“Come on, Doctor,” Rose chuckled. “Jack will get us out, and this will probably be the only time you and I dance to this song. He has a habit of cutting in whenever it plays. Or he will at least.”

“Rose,” the Doctor sighed, sounding a bit flustered. “This really isn’t the time.”

“What are you afraid of dancing with me?” Rose challenged, tilting her head up. “Afraid you’ll step on my toes, Doctor?”

“I think it’s safe to assume that I can dance, Rose,” the Doctor retorted. Rose thought he sounded a bit flustered and inwardly grinned. “I’m over 900 years old, you know.”

“Oh, I know you dance,” Rose sighed happily. “Sleeping Beauty Waltz in Prague. You were in your eighth body then. Remember?”

He froze, and the sonic screwdriver stopped whirling. Then the Doctor turned back to her with a dazed expression that made Rose’s heart jump. It was all she could do to keep from grinning like a
loon or jumping around excitedly. Instead, she gave him a teasing smile. His eyes widened further, and emotion flared across the sharp blue irises. The Doctor almost stumbled down from the window, still staring at her in shock.

“Temporally complex relationship,” Rose reminded him, holding out her hand. “Come on, Doctor, dance with me.” She might have hooded her eyes a bit. “And yes, that is a challenge.”

He shifted a little closer, his whole body taut. “Haven’t danced with this body yet,” the Doctor murmured to her as their eyes met and held.

“Doesn’t matter Doctor,” Rose assured him, a little breathlessly. “It’s me. It’s us; we’ll be fine.”

There was a lot more to the words than just dancing, and Rose could tell that the Doctor knew that as much as she did. His Adam’s apple bobbed, and he swayed a little closer. Rose’s heart jumped. For a moment she thought- she hoped that he’d kiss her, but then he stopped. A shaky exhaled escaped him, but he took her hand, and they started to sway.

“I’m a bit rusty.”

“That’s fine,” Rose assured him. “It’s us. It’ll be fine.”
The Doctor Dances: Bomb Site

Journey Amongst the Stars

By Lumendea

Chapter Twenty-Eight: The Doctor Dances: Bomb Site

Disclaimer: I do not own Doctor Who or any of the spinoff material and I gain no income off of this story, just the satisfaction of playing with the characters.

AN: You know how all of you think I’m a wonder at planning… well there was supposed to be an original episode between Girl in the Fireplace and this two parter that I forgot about. Just forgot about. That’s why there’s been so many rewrites and only one original so far. So now I am laughing at myself and tweaking my plan to include Jack in the adventure. Thought you might find it funny that I got so excited about Jack that I tripped myself up. Plus side, it will now have Jo Grant meeting Jack Harkness which could end up being epic.

………………

The Doctor did not know what to make of today. Nothing had turned out how he expected, and while usually that would entertain him, this time it left him feeling… untethered. Rose was smiling at him softly as they swayed. She was calm and relaxed despite the gas mask zombies hunting for them. Soft instrumental songs continued to play from the speaker, and he was enjoying their gentle swaying more than he would like to admit.

This body was rusty. His last body had been the romantic one. In that life, he’d decided to stop worrying so much about the Time Lords and their rules. If Rose had traveled with him then… he pushed that thought aside and knew his ears were turning red. Rose didn’t ask, but there was a spark of something in her eyes. Maybe she already knew what he’d been thinking about or thought it was something else.

He almost said something. He almost put an end to this, but he didn’t. Rose was looking up at him in a way that he just didn’t know what to do with. It made all sorts of dangerous ideas spring to mind. Her hip was warm beneath his hand, and her hand fit into his hand perfectly as usual. Despite his hesitation, Rose had been right; they were fine. Then again, she was usually right.

“Told you it would be fine,” Rose whispered with a smile.

“We’re not out of this yet,” the Doctor pointed out. He shook himself a little, realizing that he’d
missed something. He was too distracted. “Barrage balloon? Are your hands okay?” He started to pull back, but Rose just shifted closer. “Rose?”

“I’m fine,” Rose assured him. Her voice was still soft. He told himself that she was whispering to keep the gas mask zombies from finding them, but it also preserved the soft atmosphere. “Jack had some medical tech that fixed my hands. They don’t hurt anymore.”

“Medical tech?”

“Not as fancy as the TARDIS medical bay,” Rose assured him. “Don’t worry; our Gorgeous Lady remains the best ship in the universe.”

The Doctor couldn’t ignore the rush of pleasure at hearing Rose call the TARDIS theirs. It was silly. In the past, he might have been offended at companions saying such things, but it was just another way that Rose was different. He swallowed back the surge of emotions that were making his heart beat a little too fast. Rose was smiling at him, but it was her soft, patient smile. The Doctor was grateful for that. Yet… he despite her assurances that she had no romantic feelings for Jack, he couldn’t help but worry that someday that patience would wear out.

He might have pulled her a little closer so that their legs touched as they swayed. It was barely dancing, but the excuse to be so close was incredible. The scent of Rose’s soap and shampoo filled his nose and pushed away the dank dust of the storage room. Of course, it made it hard to think. The music faded away, and the smell of the room changed. The Doctor blinked. They were in a ship. The Doctor kept his hand on Rose’s waist as he did a quick check for danger. Then he heard that blasted pretty boy’s voice.

“Most people notice when they’ve been teleported,” Jack said with a grin. He was in the captain’s chair at the front of the narrow ship. “You guys are so sweet.” The Doctor released Rose’s hands. “Sorry about the delay. I had to take the nav-com offline to override the teleport security.

Rose sort of wanted to throttle Jack. Yes, she was glad to be out of that storage room and away from the gas mask zombies, but she and the Doctor had been having a moment. Yes, it was unlikely that their dance in said storeroom was going to the tipping point, but any moment was worth a lot right now! She missed the romance more than she’d ever admit out loud. The Doctor didn’t often let himself look at her like that, and she’d missed it.

“You can spend ten minutes overriding your own protocols?” the Doctor asked. “Maybe you should remember whose ship it is.”
“Oh, I do. She was gorgeous.” Jack was grinning like he didn’t have a care in the world. “Like I told her, be back in five minutes.”

“This is a Chula ship,” the Doctor said.

“Yeah, just like that medical transporter.” Jack gave the Doctor a pointed look, and Rose worried that another argument was about to break out. “Only this one is dangerous.”

The Doctor held Jack’s gaze for a long moment but said nothing. Then he snapped his fingers. The golden glow of the nanogenes rushed around his hands and enveloped them in light. The Doctor turned his hands and studied them thoughtfully.

“That’s what Jack used to fix my hands,” Rose clarified. “Called them nanogenes.”

“Sub-atomic robots,” the Doctor explained. There’s millions of them in here, see? Burned my hand on the console when we landed. All better now.” There was something in the Doctor’s tone that Rose couldn’t identify, but it carried a hint of danger. “They activate when the bulk head’s sealed. Check you out for damage, fix any physical flaws. Take us to the crash site. I need to see your space junk,” the Doctor ordered Jack.

“As soon as I get the nav-com back online,” Jack said with a nod. Then he turned teasing again. “Make yourself comfortable. Carry on with whatever it was you were doing.”

“We were talking about dancing,” the Doctor said. He sounded a touch offended.

“It didn’t look like talking,” Jack said.

“Because it wasn’t.” Rose smiled at the Doctor, enjoying the way his ears turned a bit red. “But back the crisis at hand, I suppose.” She leaned against the side of the ship and eyed the two men. “So, we know that the child is patient one and seems to be in command of all the others. He definitely got infected at the crash site. Somehow he isn’t dead, so whatever technology is involved is keeping him alive despite the injuries.”

“Exactly,” the Doctor agreed. “But exactly what that tech was and how to reverse it, we don’t
“Just a bit more and we’ll be on our way,” Jack promised.

“So, what have you got against the Time Agency?” Rose asked. “I mean, why try to con them.”

“If it makes me sound any better, it’s not for the money,” Jack said.

“Then, what are you after?” Rose asked. She and Jack had never discussed this.

“Woke up one day when I was still working for them, found they’d stolen two years of my memories.” Jack swung in the chair to look at her and the Doctor. “I’d like them back.”

“They stole your memories?” A chill ran up Rose’s spine at the very idea.

“Two years of my life. No idea what I did.” Jack looked at the Doctor, who was staring at the wall. “Your friend over there doesn’t trust me, and for all I know he’s right not to.” The controls beeped, and Jack forced a smile. “Okay, we’re good to go. Crash site?”

“Yes,” the Doctor said. “I need a look at the space junk.”

“It was just a Chula Ambulance,” Jack huffed.

Something clicked in Rose’s brain. “Wait a minute,” Rose breathed as she blinked in shock. “If the ship was of Chula design…” she trailed off. Frowning, Rose tried to gather her thoughts. Something was trying to connect and push its way through. “Doctor, you said that the nanogenes fix any physical danger.”

“That’s what they’re programmed for,” the Doctor confirmed.

“Then, why have an ambulance at all, don’t all Chula ships have these nanogenes?” Nervous and terrified energy was welling up in Rose. Her mind was racing, and the pieces were fitting together with horrible precision. “What would be the point unless the ambulance had a lot more of them?”
She saw the horror dawning in Jack’s eyes as the Doctor’s eyes sharpened with realization. His grip on her hand tightened, and he tried to tug her away from Jack. Rose didn’t let him move her. This wasn’t the time.

“No, no no,” Jack muttered as he turned and began adjusting his controls. “That can’t be- how!”

“It wasn’t empty then,” the Doctor murmured in a low voice. “Funny how you couldn’t figure that out, Captain.”

“Doctor,” Rose scolded lightly with a careful look at Jack’s back. “Not the priority right now. Jack, we need to get to the crash site and find a way to shut the nanogenes down.” She gave both men a warning look, one to keep Jack from running and the other to keep the Doctor from berating the other. “If I’m right then there might be a recall feature built into the unit or a way to shut them down.”

“That’s possible,” Jack agreed. His hands were flying over the controls, and he had started to shake. “That would make sense. Normally they only activate when the bulkhead is sealed-”

“But they were released. For an ambulance they probably function as battlefield medicine,” the Doctor cut in. “More useful than having to haul everyone back to a ship.”

Jack was nodding, but his focus was on the controls. Rose noticed that he’d gone very pale and looked ready to be sick. Stepping forward, she reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. They would fix this, she told herself firmly. She had faith in them. Jack flinched at little at her touch but didn’t pull away. Thankfully, the Doctor didn’t say anything as the ship moved forward.

The night provided very little cover to Nancy as she crept her way forward. Soldier were patrolling around the large metal thing in the middle of the compound that was under a tarpaulin. Spotlights had been set up along with watchtowers, and the whole place was surrounded by barbed wire fence. That had been easy enough to cut through, but now she had to worry about everything else.

Suddenly she was surrounded by light. Nancy blinked against the glare and started to pull back. A spotlight had found her. Nancy was about to run when soldiers came rushing forward. Rifles were pointed at her, and her heart leapt into her throat.
“Halt!” a soldier barked. “Don’t move!”

Nancy nodded. She didn’t know what to say, how to explain what she was after. She didn’t fully understand it herself. One of the soldiers eyed her carefully but relaxed his grip on his rifle. Apparently, she didn’t look like much of a threat. For a brief moment, she hoped they would let her go.

“Come on,” one of the soldiers said. “To the right. That building there.” He gestured with his rifle. “March.”

Seeing no other option, Nancy started to walk. The soldiers closed in around her, blocking off any chance of escape. She was tempted, but common sense reminded her that there was a war on. If she ran now, they’d shoot at her, assuming she was a spy. Nancy swallowed and took a few slow breaths, urging herself to calm down.

The building was small and barren. A table was set up with a few chairs. One soldier was sitting down and swaying slightly. He tried to stand up when they walked in, but an office waved him down.

“As you were,” the officer said. There was a hint of kindness in his voice. “Feeling any better?”

“Just a touch, sir,” the ill man said. Nancy’s eyes dropped to his hand. There was a scar forming on the skin, a very familiar scar.

“Chain her up where Jenkins can keep an eye on her,” the officer ordered another soldier.

“No, not in here,” Nancy said firmly. Her voice quivered only a little.

“You shouldn’t have broken in here if you didn’t want to stay,” the officer said.

She didn’t know how to explain. They pushed her down into the chair gently and began to cuff her hands to the table. Nancy didn’t fight, fear was creeping up on her, and she watched the sick man’s face carefully. Sooner or later, it would change.

“This is a restricted area, miss. You can just sit here for a bit. We’re going to have to ask you a few questions.”

One soldier stepped forward with her bag and held out her bolt cutters. Nancy deflated at the sight of them. “Found these, sir.” He handed them to the officer.

“Very professional. A little bit too professional.” The officer was eyeing her suspiciously now. “Didn’t just drop in by accident then, did you?

“My little brother died here,” Nancy answered honestly. At least, mostly honestly. “I wanted to find out what killed him.” She looked up at the officer, hoping he’d see the truth in her eyes.

The man huffed a little. “Take the men, check the fence for any other breaches, and search the area. She may not have come here alone.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Please!” Nancy gave up on being calm, letting her desperation shine through. “Listen, you can’t leave me here.”

“Watch her, Jenkins,” the officer ordered. He looked bored now and just as suspicious as before.

“Yes, Mummy,” Jenkins said.

Nancy flinched. The officer didn’t seem to properly notice. “Jenkins?”

Jenkins shivered but looked at his commanding officer apologetically. “Sorry, sir. I don’t know what’s the matter with me.”
“Look, lock me up, fine, but not here.” The officer was turning to leave. “Please, anywhere, but here!”

Then he was gone, leaving her chained to a table with a man who was shortly going to become like all the others. Nancy’s heart was racing too fast, and there was a moment, a brief moment when she almost decided not to bother fighting. Jamie was gone, he was dead. There wasn’t anything she could do. She was just a stupid girl in over her head. The words her mother had said when she’d confessed rang through her ears.

“You’ll be all right, miss,” Jenkins said. He was trying to calm her down, but Nancy could see it in his eyes. He was already slipping. “I’m just a little. Just a little, just a little. What’s the matter with you?” She was pulling on the cuffs.

“Please, let me go,” Nancy begged.

“Why would I do that?” the man asked in evident confusion. He was in a near dazed state.

“Because you’ve got a scar on the back of your hand,” Nancy said as calmly as she could.

“Well, yes, but I don’t see what that’s got to do with anything.”

“And you feel like you’re going to be sick, like something’s forcing its way up your throat. I know because I’ve seen it before.”

The man was looking at her with new eyes, fearful and pleading. “What’s happening to me?”

“In a minute, you won’t be you anymore. You won’t even remember you. And unless you let me go, it’s going to happen to me too. Please,” Nancy added the plea to the end desperately.

“What’re you talking about?”

“What’s your mother’s name?” Nancy asked.
“Matilda,” he answered slowly.

“You got a wife?” Nancy pressed.

“Yes.”

“Wife’s name?” Nancy demanded. “You got kids? What’s your name?” Jenkins blinked vacantly at her, his mouth opening once or twice as he tried to find the answers in his head. “Please, let me go. It’s too late for you. I’m sorry, but please let me go.”

“What do you mmmmm….” Jenkin’s face began to change, his nose vanishing and his mouth contorting to morph into a gas mask. Nancy pulled at the cuffs, but she was trapped. “Mummy.”
They beamed down to the surface, and thankfully it didn’t make Rose’s head spin. Up ahead, the compound was being patrolled by guards and spotlights were searching the area. The area was out of place to Rose. This wasn’t a city; this was something else altogether. Then again, this was World War II, not the London she grew up in.

“What’s the plan?” Rose asked.

She and the boys moved behind a small wall of sandbags, keeping out of the light and watching the soldiers. There was only a small number of them, but they were all armed. Rose searched her memories, but she wasn’t sure if everything that fell was guarded like this. If they thought it was a bomb that didn’t explode then surely, they would have defused it.

“Think they know it’s the source of the plague?” Rose asked.

“Not sure,” the Doctor said. “They’re keeping people away, but no gas masks on the soldiers or other protective gear.”

“Well, they’ve got Algie on duty,” Jack said. “So they consider it important.” He nodded at an officer near the gate into the area.

“The words distract the guard to mind,” Rose said. She glanced down at herself and sighed. “Not exactly dressed for this era.”
“Oh, I don’t know,” Jack said. He was smiling a little again. “That shirt would certainly get some attention, but trust me distracting Algie is likely to go better if I go.”

“You sure?” Rose eyed the man. She knew what Jack was saying, but she wasn’t sure if he was right about the man on duty. “If you’re wrong-”

“I’ve got to know Algy quite well since I’ve been in town.” Jack stood up and dusting himself off, slipping back into his confident and charming mask. “Trust me; you’re not his type. I’ll distract him. Don’t wait up.”

“Be careful,” Rose said firmly.

Jack paused and looked back at her with an uncertain expression. He seemed truly surprised at her being worried about him. Rose tried not to grimace at the idea that he might be. Jack recovered quickly and winked at her before swaggering towards the gate. A soft sigh escaped Rose. She just wasn’t sure how to proceed with him. Jack reached the main gate, and the officer on duty immediately took notice of him.

“He’s your friend?” the Doctor asked. “Really? I don’t see it.”

“It’s a bit weird,” Rose agreed. “So what’s your plan for when we get to the ship?”

“Not sure,” the Doctor admitted. “I need to see the ship and review the controls. If we’re lucky, there’ll be an easy way for me to update the nanogene’s database to include humans like the ones on Jack’s ship do.”

“Can we use the ones from Jack’s ship?” Rose asked. “If they’re a hive mind would they update directly from those ones?” Hope flared in her chest. “Like a synching system.”

“No,” the Doctor said. “Different network pattern, I’m afraid. They’re tied to the ship’s systems. We’d have to completely reprogram them to get them to even work outside the ship and then have to change their network pattern to get them to the talk to the others.”

“And no time.”
“No time,” the Doctor agreed. “We need a fast way to deal with this.”

Rose inwardly agreed, but she didn’t think it was going to be that simple. DNA was complicated. Even in her own time, what they thought they knew about it was being expanded and reevaluated. In this period, there was a limit to what tools were even available to them.

“What if we knock out the guards and get the TARDIS?”

“We haven’t much time. That bomb is due soon.” The Doctor glanced up at the sky. “Which means another bombing raid.”

“God, I can’t imagine.” Rose shook her head and looked up at the nearby balloons. “You hear about it, growing up in London, but seeing it is something else. Bombs falling, and people keep living their lives.”

“Not much else they can do.” A soft sigh escaped the Doctor. “That girl, Nancy, she’d been looking after the children living on the streets. Using bomb raids as a chance to steal food. Once it starts, she’ll likely be out searching again.”

“Better than her being here,” Rose said.

The Doctor made a soft unconvinced noise that Rose wasn’t sure what to make of. Suddenly Algie collapsed on the ground, and Jack stumbled back from him. The Doctor raced towards the gate, and Rose bolted after him. As they came to a stop beside Jack, Algie was lifting his head, but his face had already been transformed into a gas mask. More soldiers began to rush forward.

“Stay back!” the Doctor snapped.

“You men, stay away!” Jack ordered. His uniform made them pause.

“The effect’s become airborne, accelerating,” the Doctor said.
Air raid sirens began to sound, filling the night’s sky. “What’s keeping us safe?” Rose asked nervously.

“Nothing,” the Doctor answered.

“Ah, here they come again,” Jack groaned. Gas mask zombies were beginning to appear around the compound, held back only by the fence. “What now?”

“If the contaminants airborne now, there’s hours left,” the Doctor said.

“For what?” Jack asked.

“Till nothing, forever. For the entire human race,” the Doctor answered. Then he paused for a moment. “And can anyone else hear singing?”

....................

The soldier was slumped over the table and snoring softly. His face was a horrific version of itself, now warped into the shape of a gas mask and his eyes unseeing. Nancy sat beside him, softly singing to keep him asleep as her mind raced for a way to escape. She was still bound to the table, and if anyone woke the sleeping man, she’d been the next one infected.

Tears stung Nancy’s eyes as she sang softly. The song hung in the air, haunting her and the soft sounds of the sleeping soldier taunted her. Jamie was gone, and yet all of these creatures carried a part of him. Her precious Jamie was scattered. A ghost in the world, haunting her for her misdeeds and punishing the world.

Nancy knew that it wasn’t her fault, but it stung. The ache and the wondering about what if she’d done things differently. She’d been revealed, so revealed when mother had told her the plan. They’d gone off to the north for a few months to stay in a little village far from London and father had visited a couple of times. Just enough times to make it seem possible that Jamie was theirs when they came back. God forgive her, but she’d been grateful not to have the responsibility of being a mother.

But now, she wondered what if she’d been honest. It was a foul thought. People would have judged her, and no one would have married her. The shame of it being public likely would have
broken her parents. They might have turned her out or made her give up the baby so she’d have never seen Jamie at all. Trapped, she’d been trapped. There’d never been a happy end to her story.

“When the wind blows, the cradle will rock,” Nancy sang. Someone moved by the door, and Nancy looked over in alarm. It was that strange man who’d been following her. He gestured for her to keep singing and Nancy obeyed. “When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall. Down will come baby, cradle and all.”

The man came closer and with a strange silver tube, opened the cuffs. Somehow, Nancy kept singing as she and the stranger crept towards the doorway. The soldier sleeping on the table didn’t move. When she stepped outside, Nancy’s knees buckled in relief, but she stayed upright.

“Thank you.”

“Course,” the man said. “I’m the Doctor by the way.”

“Nancy,” she replied dutifully.

“Yeah, caught on to that,” he teased. “Don’t wander off. There’s more of them on the perimeter.”

Nancy wanted to ask for details, but the Doctor was striding towards the crashed object with long strides. Another man with dark hair and a blonde woman were pulling off the tarp that covered it. The object was long and cylindrical. Nothing about it seemed dangerous at first glance. But she knew better and made no move to touch it.

……………………………..

“Here it is,” Jack said to Rose. He was shaking his head. “It looked empty, I swear. It was only an ambulance.”

“I know,” Rose said gently. “I know. Stay calm. We’ll figure this out.”

“That’s an ambulance?” Nancy asked.

“They’d been trying to get in,” Jack said, examining the sides of the ship.

“Of course they have,” the Doctor said. “They think they’ve got their hands on Hitler’s latest secret weapon.”

Jack reached for the control panel. “Let me see if I can get access to the protocols-”

“No, wait,” the Doctor ordered.

The warning came too lang. There was a bang that sent Jack scrambling back as spark flared from the control panel. An alarm began to sound, and the panel flashed bright red. Apparently, it’s alarm was coded to red, Roes thought bitterly.

“That didn’t happen last time,” Jack said weakly.

“It hadn’t crashed last time. There’ll be emergency protocols.”

“I’m sorry!” Jack shouted. His was pale, even in the darkness. “I’m so sorry. I tried to make sure that it wouldn’t hurt anyone. I failed and I’m sorry.” Jack took a deep breath and swallowed, trying to control himself. “Please, if you can, please help me fix this.”

The Doctor’s stern expression softened and he clamored up onto the ship. Rose followed him, barely able to keep her balance on the narrow top. The Doctor was near the top and was studying the access panel.

“Can you fix it from here?” Rose asked. She leaned over his shoulder and watched as the TARDIS translated the controls. “Or at least turn off the alarms?”

“No sure,” the Doctor said. “The problem isn’t that they aren’t working. They’re working too well. They’ve got the wrong template for what a human being is supposed to be.”
“Shit,” Jack muttered. He was pacing along the ship and eyeing the perimeter. “There’s got to a be a way right? We’re intact!” He gestured at the three of them only to pause when he came to the Doctor. “Uh, never mind. You’re not human, right?”

“No,” the Doctor answered gruffly. “I’m not. But Rose is.”

“So history hasn’t completely changed yet,” Jack argued.

“A bit of hush,” the Doctor said. “I’m trying to see if I can input the correct genetic information for a human into the system.”

“It’ll have to be Rose,” Jack said. “I’m from too far in the future.”

“I’m aware of the inclinations of your ancestors,” the Doctor huffed. “Just hush.”

“Doctor, Rose!” Nancy called. “They’re coming!”

They all looked up to find gas mask zombies slowly marching towards them. They were breaking their way through everything in their path.

“Captain, secure those gates!” the Doctor ordered.

“Why?” Jack asked.

“Just do it! Nancy, how’d you get in here?”

“I cut the wire.”

“Rose!”
Rose jumped down and hurried over to Nancy. She took the younger woman’s hand and let Nancy lead her towards the hole in the fence that she’d made. Nancy’s stomach churned uncomfortably, and she pulled her hand away, not sure what to do with the sudden human contact. Even the street children never tried to hug her. Rose thankfully, didn’t try to take her hand again.

They climbed over the sandbag barricade, and Nancy pointed to the hole she’d made. It was small, but most of the gas mask zombies would be able to use it. Without a word, Rose knelt beside it and pulled out what looked like a fancy pen. Overhead, Nancy heard the hum of plan engines and the whine of bombs falling through the air. She swallowed back her fear as the world fell apart around her.

“Who are you?” Nancy asked, half afraid of the answer. Her Gran had once told her stories of the Irish Fae who were from other worlds and stole people away. Right now, she’d be happy to be stolen away. “Who are any of you?”

The blonde woman, Rose, chuckled softly and tugged two bits of wire together. “You’d never believe me if I told you.”

“You just told me that was an ambulance from another world. There are people running around with gas mask heads calling for their mummies, and the sky’s full of Germans dropping bombs on me.” Nancy was amazed that her voice didn’t shake. “Tell me, do you think there’s anything left I couldn’t believe?”

Rose turned her face to look at Nancy. It wasn’t like being looked at a normal person. Rose’s brown eyes were sharp, and there was a hint of danger dancing in them on tiny golden flecks. Nancy wanted to back away, but she was kneeling on the ground, and thus there was no quick escape. Whatever the woman was looking for, she seemed to find it because a moment later, she nodded.

“We’re time travellers from the future,” Rose answered.

“Mad, you are.” Nancy allowed herself to laugh a little.

“It’s true,” Rose said calmly. She was almost smiling and grabbed Nancy’s hands to have her hold the wire. The woman’s pen whirled, and the pieces seemed to melt back together. “We have a time machine.”
“It’s not that,” Nancy told her. “All right, you’ve got a time travel machine. I believe you. Believe anything, me.” Her eyes drifted up into the sky. “But what future?”

“Nancy, this isn’t the end of the world,” Rose said. She finished with the wires and slipped the pen into her pocket, turning to face Nancy. “Not even close.”

“How can you say that?” Nancy asked. Her voice quivered now. “Look at it.”

“I am looking at it,” Rose said gently. “And do you know what I see?” Nancy didn’t answer, but Rose didn’t seem to expect her to. “The city that I’ll be born and raised in about fifty years from now. A city that is going to survive this.”

“You’re from here?” Nancy asked dumbly.

“I’m a Londoner. From your future.”

“But, but you’re not…”

“Not what?”

“German.”

“No, I’m not,” Rose agreed. “Nancy, the Germans never invade England. They never get the chance. As bad as things look now, I can tell you that they don’t win the war. You do.”

“We win?” Nancy repeated the words. They didn’t sound real.

Rose nodded and stood up, giving Nancy a soft look. It reminded Nancy of the last time her mother had helped her to bed. Jamie had been a baby, and things had been tense, but her mother had sat beside her with a gentle smile that promised it would all be alright. Rose extended a hand to Nancy. This time Nancy took it.
Rose and Nancy rushed back to the boys. Jack’s face was pale, and his hands were shaking despite his efforts to hide his horror. The Doctor was glaring at the ambulance with raw rage. Rose’s stomach dropped as she realized that the Doctor had no idea of how to fix this.

“They brought the boy back to life,” Jack groaned. “I can’t- I didn’t-”

“What’s life? Life’s easy. A quirk of matter. Nature’s way of keeping meat fresh,” the Doctor snarled. “Nothing to a nanogene. One problem, though. These nanogenes, they’re not like the ones on your ship. This lot have never seen a human being before. Don’t know what a human being’s supposed to look like. All they’ve got to go on is one little body, and there’s not a lot left. But they carry right on. They do what they’re programmed to do. They patch it up. Can’t tell what’s gasmask and what’s skull, but they do their best. Then off they fly, off they go, work to be done. Because, you see, now they think they know what people should look like, and it’s time to fix all the rest. And they won’t ever stop. They won’t ever, ever stop. The entire human race is going to be torn down and rebuilt in the form of one terrified child looking for its mother, and nothing in the world can stop it!”

“I didn’t know,” Jack offered weakly. “I never would have risked it if I had known.”

The Doctor’s fingers moved across the access panel, desperately trying to do something. Nancy shivered and stepped closer to Rose, her grip on Rose’s hand tightening. Rose wanted to comfort her, but she had no idea what she could say. All the words were caught in her throat.

“Mummy. Mummy,” the gas mask zombies chanted.
“Rose!” Nancy gasped.

“Is the ship calling them?” Rose asked the Doctor. “Can we turn it off, buy some time?”

“The ship thinks it’s under attack. It’s calling up the troops. Standard protocol.”

“But the gas mask people aren’t troops.”

“They are now. This is a battlefield ambulance,” the Doctor reminded her. “The nanogenes don’t just fix you up; they get you ready for the front line. Equip you, program you.”

“That’s why the child’s so strong. Why it could do that phoning thing. It has all the Chula abilities now.”

“It’s a fully equipped Chula warrior, yes. All that weapons tech in the hands of a hysterical four-year-old looking for his mummy. And now there’s an army of them,” the Doctor said.

The patients had surrounded them, outside the barbed wire, but they made no move to rush the fence. Remembering the child breaking the wall, Rose was certain that the barbed wire fence wouldn’t stop them. For a long moment, she and the others stared at the gas mask people who stared back at them.

“Why don’t they attack?” Jack asked, voicing Rose’s question.

Nancy was still holding Rose’s hand. Her shoulders were slumped as if she was trying to make herself small. Still, the young woman wasn’t crying or panicking, and Rose felt a warm rush of pride in her.

“Good little soldiers, waiting for their commander,” the Doctor said.

“The child?” Jac asked, still sounded stunned by the mere idea.
“Jamie,” Nancy said.

“What?” Jack turned to Nancy, who lifted her chin.

“Not the child, Jamie.”

“So how long until the bomb falls?” Rose asked with a nervous glance at Nancy.

“Any second,” Jack answered.

“What’s the matter, Captain? A bit close to the volcano for you?” the Doctor sneered. He moved closer to Nancy as she began to quiver.

“Will the bomb stop this?” Rose asked delicately.

“No, it’ll destroy the currently infected,” the Doctor said. A sob escaped Nancy. “But it won’t stop the nanogenes.”

“He’s just a little boy,” Nancy told the Doctor.

“I know.”

“He’s just a little boy who wants his mummy.” Nancy’s expression was one of despair and guilt. Rose suddenly had the feeling that she was missing something, but had no idea what.

“I know,” the Doctor promised Nancy. “There isn’t a little boy born who wouldn’t tear the world apart to save his mummy. And this little boy can.”

“So what’re we going to do?” Rose asked, hopefully.

“I don’t know.” The Doctor looked her way, apologies in his eyes, and Rose reached out with her
free hand to grab his. He accepted her attempt at comfort and squeezed her hand. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s my fault,” Nancy gasped through a wave of tears.

“No.” The Doctor’s voice was gentle.

“It is. It’s all my fault,” Nancy insisted.

“How can it be your-”


Tears were rolling down Nancy’s cheeks, but even now, they were limited as the young woman fought for control. Rose shifted closer to her, pressed their arms together, and squeezing Nancy’s hand. If she’d thought she could wrestle her hand away, she would have hugged Nancy.

“Nancy?” Rose whispered. “Stay with us.”

“Nancy, what age are you?” the Doctor asked suddenly. Rose looked at him in confusion, and Nancy’s shaking grew worse. “Twenty? Twenty-one? Older than you look, yes?”

“Doctor, that bomb,” Jack snapped. “We’ve got seconds.”

“Can you teleport us out?” Rose asked Jack.

“Not you guys. The nav-com’s back online.” Jack swallowed, guilt washing over his face as Rose’s stomach tightened. “Going to take too long to override the protocols.”

“So, it’s volcano day,” the Doctor said. He kept his eye on Nancy and didn’t look at Jack. “Do what you’ve got to do.”
“Jack?” Rose looked at her friend. He met her gaze but then vanished. “What?” Rose whispered in shock.

“How old were you five years ago?” the Doctor asked Nancy. Rose forced her attention back to his questions. “Fifteen? Sixteen? Old enough to give birth, anyway.” Rose’s eyes widened as pieces began to fall into place. “He’s not your brother, is he? A teenage single mother in 1941. So, you hid. You lied. You even lied to him.”

The gates were smashed open with a crash. Rose jumped, and they all looked over to see Jamie now at the head of the small army. Nancy barely moved, her face still turned down, and Rose knew that the Doctor was right. Tears were flowing down the young woman’s face, and Rose kept hold of Nancy’s hand.

“Are you my mummy?” Jamie asked, his voice loud across the bomb site.

“He’s going to keep asking, Nancy.” The Doctor’s voice was soft. “He’s never going to stop.”

More tears escaped Nancy. Her grip on Rose’s hand tightened. She wanted to run away from the Doctor and Rose. They knew too much. Years of secrets laid bare. Jamie kept calling for his mother, for her as he and the others approached. She wanted to run, knew she should flee, but her legs wouldn’t move.

“Mummy?”

He was too young to remember her mother, the woman who had committed herself to raising him and only knew her. If the war hadn’t happened and- Nancy sobbed again.

“Tell him,” the Doctor said. She managed to raise her gaze to him. His blue eyes were pleading, the sharpness gone from them. “Nancy, the future of the human race is in your hands. Trust me and tell him.”

A hundred protests clawed at her throat and threatened to spill out. Rose squeezed her hand and then slowly released her grip. Nancy knew she could run. In her gut, she knew that the Doctor and Rose wouldn’t stop her. They’d call after her, but they wouldn’t hurt her. Swallowing, Nancy felt a flicker of something unexpected in her chest. It took her a long moment to recognize it as hope.
Inhaling slowly, Nancy turned and walked towards Jamie. He was walking towards her, his distorted voice looking up at her and his voice calling to her. She stopped only a foot away from him, and he didn’t immediately reach out to infect her.

“Are you my mummy?” he asked. That was the question he’d asked her that night, that horrible night of the bombing. She’d run then, leaving him alone for a bit and promising to be back soon. He’d come looking for her and- “Are you my mummy?” he repeated. “Are you my mummy?”

“Yes,” Nancy gasped. The word released a weight on her chest as soon as it escaped her. “Yes, I am your mummy.” The words were stronger this time.

“Mummy?”

“I’m here,” Nancy promised.

“Are you my mummy?” He asked again.

“I’m here.” Nancy sniffed, wondering if he could really hear her. It was Jamie’s question, but what if it was too late?

“Are you my mummy?”

“Yes,” Nancy said. She raised her voice, trying to break through the fog around her son.

“He doesn’t understand,” the Doctor said behind her. He sounded defeated. “There’s not enough of him left.”

Nancy didn’t let go of the hope. She couldn’t. She’d run once, she’d let her parents take care of Jamie in her stead, and then fled when he asked the wrong question. She couldn’t run again; she wouldn’t.

“I am your mummy,” Nancy promised. “I will always be your mummy.” Kneeling, she reached for Jamie. “I’m so sorry. I am so, so sorry.”
Wrapping her arms around her boy, Nancy focused on his warmth and ignored the horrible gas mask. Tears were streaming down her face. In the back of her mind, she knew that the plague would take her now, but this was better than running. Even that dark fate was better than running from her son again. Her hands tightened around him. Then Jamie’s arms came up around her, and Nancy managed a tiny smile.

Rose stayed close to the Doctor, holding her breath as the nanogenes swept in around Nancy and Jamie. Their golden glow surrounded the pair, and Rose’s stomach turned. She glanced at the Doctor only to find him watching with wide and hopeful eyes.

“Come on, please,” the Doctor whispered. “Come on, you clever little nanogenes. Figure it out! The mother, she’s the mother. It’s got to be enough information. Figure it out.”

“Oh,” Rose breathed. Her eyes fixed back on Nancy. “You’re trying to-

“It’s working!” the Doctor said. “See? Recognising the same DNA.”

Jamie released Nancy who fell back on the ground. The Doctor dashed forward, and Rose was right behind him. She dropped down beside Nancy and smiled as she found the young woman still fully human. The Doctor was in front of Jamie.

“Oh, come on. Give me a day like this. Give me this one.” The Doctor reached down to Jamie’s chin, and Rose held her breath. The gas mask lifted away from the boy’s skin, revealing a soft pale face with fully human features. “Ha-ha! Welcome back!” The Doctor scooped the boy up, grinning widely. “Twenty years till pop music - you’re going to love it.”

“What happened?” Nancy asked in a watery voice.

“The nanogenes recognised the superior information, the parent DNA.” The Doctor set Jamie back down, and the boy went straight into his mother’s arms. “They didn’t change you because you changed them! Ha-ha! Mother knows best!”

“Oh, Jamie,” Nancy cried happily.
Overhead, Rose could hear the whistling. “Doctor, that bomb.”

“Taken care of it,” the Doctor answered with a huge grin.

“How?” Then Rose chuckled. “Jack.”

“Yep, figured your pretty boy could make himself useful.”

“He’s not my pretty boy.”

The bomb came into view, rushing down from the pitch-black sky. A ship swooped in behind it and a beam of light, a very familiar beam of light, caught it.”

Rose heard Nancy gasp, but her attention was on the bomb as Jack appeared astride it. The sight almost made her laugh, but there was a tension in the air that clung to her lungs.

“Doctor!” Jack called.

“Good lad!” The Doctor’s voice rang with approval.

“The bomb’s already commenced detonation. I’ve put it in stasis, but it won’t last long.”

“Change of plan. Don’t need the bomb,” the Doctor yelled. “Can you get rid of it, safely as you can?”

“Rose?” Jack’s eyes moved to her.

“Yeah?”

“Goodbye,” Jack called. Rose’s stomach dropped as Jack, and the bomb vanished. But he reappeared a moment later. “By the way, love the tee-shirt.”
Then Jack vanished again. The spaceship pulled back the beam of light, and a moment later it was blasting off into the night. A rush of golden light made Rose turn. The nanogenes were swirling around the Doctor, but he was smiling, so she didn’t panic.

“What are you doing?” Rose asked.

“Software patch. Going to email the upgrade. You want moves, Rose? I’ll give you moves.” Still grinning, the Doctor threw the nanogenes forward into the crowd of patients. They all fell to the ground. “Everybody lives, Rose. Just this once, everybody lives!”

The patients began to stand up, their faces now normal and dazed. A happy smile took over Rose’s face. Her chest felt so full that she thought it might burst. The Doctor dashed forward to speak with an older man who looked like a doctor. Rose just smiled at him and turned her attention back to Nancy and Jamie.

“What’s up?”

“I’m wonderful,” Nancy answered honestly. She smiled at Rose. “We win?”

“You win,” Rose promised. “Just stay safe in the meantime.”

“I’ll keep him safe.” Nancy pulled Jamie even tighter against her.

“Keep yourself safe too.” Rose smiled at Jamie, who blinked up at her. “He needs his Mummy.”

Nancy hesitated. She seemed to be struggling with words, but then she gave up and stepped forward to hug Rose. It was a bit awkward since Nancy wouldn’t let go of Jamie, but Rose was more than happy to accept the embrace. Then the Doctor came prancing over, still grinning for all he was worth.

“Time to go, Nancy,” the Doctor said. “Go with Doctor Constantine, he’ll give you a hand, and he could use some help himself.”
Nancy nodded and leaned up to kiss the Doctor’s cheek. He blinked in surprise but kept smiling. Rose chuckled as Nancy moved to join the others and they moved away from the abandoned tracks. The Doctor scrambled back up onto the ambulance.

“Setting this to self-destruct, soon as everybody’s clear. History says there was an explosion here. Who am I to argue with history?”

“Usually the first in line,” Rose replied. The Doctor’s grin only widened.

………………

It took them a bit to get back to the TARDIS even with the Doctor moving extra fast in his excitement. Rose had to jog to keep up with his long, animated strides. He threw open the doors of the TARDIS, still vibrating with energy in a way that reminded Rose of his next incarnation.

“The nanogenes will clean up the mess and switch themselves off, because I just told them to. Nancy and Jamie will go to Doctor Constantine for help, ditto. All in all, all things considered, fantastic!”

“It was a good day,” Rose agreed with a smile.

“The best day! Everybody lives! I need more days like this.”

“Doctor.”

“Go on, ask me anything. I’m on fire.”

“What about Jack?” Rose asked. “He said goodbye and took the bomb, that can’t mean anything good.”

The Doctor sighed, but he was already moving around the controls. “You said that he’ll save your life?”
“Several times.” Rose was starting to smile.

“Well, that’s a piece of history that I’m not going to argue with.” He hit the lever, and the TARDIS hummed. Then music began to play and the Doctor held out a hand to her. “Care to dance?”

Grinning, Rose accepted the Doctor’s hand and let him tug her closer. His footwork was a bit rusty, but not bad now that he was trying to dance. Glancing over her shoulder, Rose saw the doors of the TARDIS open and held back an amused chuckle. Jack was staring at her with wide, stunned eyes.

“Well, come on then,” Rose called.

He didn’t need to be told twice. Jack rushed out of the small dark ship and stepped into the TARDIS console room with awe playing over his features.

“Close the door, will you?” the Doctor called. “Your ship’s about to blow up. There’s going to be a draught.” Jack obediently shut the door. The Doctor let go of Rose and started the TARDIS engines. “Welcome to the Tardis.”

“Much bigger on the inside,” Jack said weakly.

“You’d better be.”

Chuckling, Rose shook her head and grabbed the Doctor’s hand. “Come on, Doctor. You’re rusty.”

“Not that rusty,” the Doctor said. Then he spun her around, suddenly a great deal more coordinated. It drew a laugh from Rose as he spun her and dipped her. She pretended not to notice the look he gave Jack as happiness settled over her.

…………………..

They danced for at least an hour, the TARDIS playing a mixture of songs to keep them on their toes. Rose danced mostly with the Doctor, but his mood was so good that he kept smiling even she danced with Jack. She took a quick break at one point, and the Doctor and Jack danced. The
Doctor’s eyes got a lot of exercise from the way he kept rolling them when Jack tried to flirt. When she finally yawned and the day caught up with her, the Doctor announced that it was bedtime for all humans onboard. Rose gestured for Jack to follow her as the Doctor hummed at the continuing music and started to check the TARDIS console, his excellent mood radiate and filling up the space.

“Now the rooms move sometimes, so don’t panic, it’s completely normal. If you get lost, the TARDIS will help you find your way with the lights so pay attention to them,” Rose explained. She stifled another yawn. “She’s telepathic and will translate for you as we travel. If you’re using something else right now, you’re going to want to take it off, so the signals don’t interfere. But feel free to keep it with you, just in case.”

“Wow!” Jack laughed and shook his head. “Are you serious?”

“Completely.”

“This ship is…” Jack exhaled and stared at the coral wall with a mix of awe and amusement. “Really something.”

“Be respectful to our Lovely Lady, and she’ll look after you,” Rose told him. Raising a hand, she brushed her fingers over the wall. “She’s sentient and knows pretty much everything.”

“Sentient?” Jack blinked and eyed the wall again. “Are you sure?”

“Given that my wardrobe is always stoked with the ideal clothing for the day, and she controls where we go, no matter what the Doctor likes to think, I’d say yeah. She’s a living creature.”

“I’ll be polite,” Jack promised. “So, she’s called the TARDIS?”

“That’s the technical name. The Doctor calls her Old Girl while I call her Gorgeous and other more complimentary names.”

“Angling to be the favourite?” Jack teased.
“The Doctor will always be the favourite, but being friendly with the time ship you live in is just a smart move.” Rose came to a stop in front of a new door that wasn’t familiar. She knew at once what it was meant to be. “Here’s your room. Make yourself at home. There’s no set wake up time or breakfast, but fair warning that the Doctor can get bored easily and will try creative ways to wake you up if you’re delaying an adventure.”

“Noted.” Jack nodded and reached for the doorknob. “Rose, thank you.” His voice was warm and sincere.

“You’re welcome,” Rose said.

Then Jack’s charming smile reappeared. “Would you like to come in? Help me break in the room?”

“Nope,” Rose said, popping the p. “Goodnight, Jack.”

He laughed and Rose headed for her own room. A warm, happy feeling filled her chest, and Rose knew that tonight, she’d sleep very very well.
Temple of Truth: Into the Rainforest

Journey Amongst the Stars

By Lumenda

Chapter Thirty-One: Temple of Truth: Into the Rainforest

Disclaimer: I do not own Doctor Who or any of the spinoff material and I gain no income off of this story, just the satisfaction of playing with the characters.

AN: Hey guys, I normally don’t do news in chapters, but please take a moment and check out the news reports on the fires in the Amazon Rainforest. It is really bad and given the setting of this episode, it felt appropriate. There isn’t much any one person can do, but if you can donate anything to the Rainforest Trust, that can help to protect what survives. They are a well rated charity according to Charity Navigator and Guide Star and help local groups buys large acreage packages of the rainforest to create conservation areas. If you have another charity in mind, that’s great, just please be sure to confirm that they are a legitimate organization.

……………….

The Doctor hated to admit it, but Jack was growing on him. He’d expected to find the young man’s presence on the TARDIS annoying and disruptive, but so far, Jack had proven himself to have good instincts when it came to how far he could push things. Jack flirted with Rose which had irritated the Doctor for only a couple of days before Jack’s tone took on a different note that indicated he recognized that Rose wasn’t interested and it turned teasing and friendly. Jack had also started flirting with him, which the Doctor found amusing rather than irritating.

Jack was also proving helpful with some of the repairs he and Rose had been working on. While Rose was brilliant and a fast learner, Jack had a better working knowledge and was more than happy to be the muscle and hold sections for him while he worked. Jack wasn’t a half-bad cook either, not as good as Rose, but after a stopover at the Belizeten markets, Jack had given Rose a night off from cooking and prepared an impressive meal that had been feeding them for a couple of days.

Rose was happier too. The first couple of days with Jack, she’d been guarded and careful, but she’d bounced back and was teasing Jack and much more comfortable. The Doctor had a suspicion that she’d contacted the older Jack she knew, but he wasn’t going to ask. Talking to Rose about her twisting timelines was dangerous on the best of days.

This morning, Rose was seated on the jump seat, drawing in her sketchbook and humming softly.
The Doctor was on his back, switching out some wires that were almost burned out. He was smiling as he surveyed the underside of the controls. All of the most damaged areas after the Time War had been fixed and switched out. He was down to reinforcing some more delicate components and doing routine maintenance. And the TARDIS was growing stronger, another year or so and she’d be able to regenerate damaged sections herself.

“So,” Jack called as he wandered into the console room. “What’s on the agenda for today?”

“Agenda?” Rose scoffed. “We don’t need an agenda.”

Jack chuckled. He was still dressing mostly in his World War II-style, and the Doctor hated to admit that the classic look suited him. His vortex manipulator was still strapped to his wrist. The Doctor didn’t love others having Time Travel, but he wasn’t going to start policing it like his dead race had now. Jack seemed fond of Rose and the Doctor had hopes that the other man would help him keep an eye on the trouble magnet.

A sharp ring distracted the Doctor from his long string of technobabble that he’d been testing Jack with. He managed to twist enough to peek out from under the console. Rose glanced at her phone and stood up from her seat. The Doctor watched her leave the console and heard her answer the call. He quickly turned his attention back to his work and told himself not to get distracted. Jack handed him the next tool that he asked for without needing it described like Rose did, and the Doctor sternly told himself not to be dismissive of Rose. She might lack technical knowledge when it came to the TARDIS, but she was the best companion he’d ever had. Even if he’d never tell any of the others that.

Rose was waiting as he slid out from under the TARDIS console. She had that look on her face, a bit excited and a touch worried that told him that the phone call had been important. But she didn’t look too worried and hadn’t yelled for him to hurry up.

“Jo called,” Rose said. “Something was found in South America that she thinks is alien. She wants us to check it out and make it isn’t dangerous.”

“Ah.” The Doctor sat up and rolled his shoulders. His hands had a bit of grease on them, but nothing bad.

“Who is Jo?” Jack jumped to his feet beside them. “And how does she know the pair of you?” He waggled his eyebrows, and Rose chuckled softly at the display.
“Exact location and date?” the Doctor asked.

Rose gave them to him dutifully, and she and Jack promptly took their places around the console. Jack held the lever he indicated down, and Rose pressed the button he told her too. He pumped the bicycle pump and grinned. Driving was a bit easier now that he had another set of hands to help him, but again, he wasn’t going to admit that.

“Seriously?” Jack called. “Who is Jo?”

“I’ll introduce you,” Rose promised. “When we get there.”

“No flirting with Jo,” the Doctor ordered.

Jack pouted. There was no other word for it. “That’s no fun.”

“She’s happily married.” The Doctor narrowed his eyes at Jack, but there was no heat in the look, and Jack knew it.

“Jo would enjoy it,” Rose said. She was smirking at both of them. “This is the woman who had the UNIT boys eating out of her hand thanks to short skirts and go-go boots.”

“Don’t remind me,” the Doctor groaned.

The TARDIS landed with a soft bump. One of the smoother landings lately and Rose grinned at him, indicating that she fully understood the source of the better landing. The Doctor ignored her, and Rose grabbed her shoulder bag from the back of the captain’s seat.

“Should I grab a jacket?” Rose asked.

“It’s the jungle, right?” Jack asked. “Early 21st century, this is the tropics.”

“Yeah, but nighttime is still a thing,” Rose said. She decided against waiting for an answer and dashed back to her room. Inside her wardrobe was a light hoodie that Rose tied around her waist.
Jack might come to regret wearing his button-down and suspenders in the tropics, but she’d be ready for anything.

“Rose!” the Doctor called.

“I’m here.” Rose returned to the console room and went straight to the door. “Not all of us have your superior temperature regulation, you know.” She rolled her eyes at the Doctor and heard Jack snort.

They stepped outside, and a way of heat hit Rose in the face. The air was hot and humid, reminding her of her trips to Bolivia and India. Hopefully, it would be more peaceful than those trips had been. They were parked under a thick canopy of trees that almost completely blocked out the sky. It was wild, but there appeared to be a path to their right. It wasn’t very wide, maybe just wide enough to get a narrow heavy-duty vehicle through.

“How smokes,” Jack laughed. He touched a nearby tree and looked around in awe. “I’ve been a lot of places, but never this far off the beaten path.”

“Well,” the Doctor said. “If Jo was going to find something long forgotten by humanity, this would be the place for it.”

“Uh?” Rose looked around as Jack and the Doctor followed her out. “Any idea which way?”

“Doctor!” the shout echoed through the forest, and birds went flying. “Doctor! Rose!”

The three time travelers turned towards the voice. Jo Jones came marching through the jungle with a wide smile and wearing beige clothing that looked out of an adventure movie. Pleasure at their arrival radiated off of the former companion.

“Oh, Darling,” Jo cheered. She swept towards Rose and threw her arms around her. “How are you?”

“I’m great, Jo,” Rose answered. She couldn’t help but smile. There was always such a warm aura around Jo that made it hard not to be happy. “How are you?”
Jo released her and smiled. “I’m lovely, Rose. Staying busy, you know me. I’ve gone a whole six months without being arrested though, so I’m not sure what to make of that.” She looked past Rose, and her smile only widened. “Doctor!”

The Doctor smiled and stayed still as Jo advanced on him. The old woman threw her arms around him and hugged him tightly. Rose laughed when the Doctor hugged her back gently. Jack was beside the Doctor and smiled at the display of affection with sparkling eyes.

“Jo, this is Jack Harkness,” Rose said. She gestured to Jack and tried to remember if Jo had ever met Jack. Maybe she’d seen in passing, but Rose wasn’t sure. Another side effect of complicated timelines. “He started traveling with us a few days ago.”

“Oh a newcomer,” Jo said. Her eyes glinted with glee. “Pleasure to meet you. I’m Jo Jones.”

“The pleasure is mine.” Jack raised Jo’s hand so he could kiss it.

“You’re a charmer, aren’t you.” Jo chuckled warmly. Her eyes went over to the Doctor. “The manners are a touch familiar.”

The Doctor scowled, but Rose could tell that he didn’t mean it. Judging from Jo’s smile, she knew it too. Jack released Jo’s hand, and she patted his cheek.

“Hope you can keep up with this pair,” Jo said. “They’re both experts at finding trouble and danger.”

“I’ve been holding my own so far, ma’am.”

“Jo used to work with the Doctor at an agency here on Earth that dealt with alien threats,” Rose said, providing some information. “And she’s a good friend of ours.”

“You’re so sweet,” Jo cooed. She grabbed the Doctor’s arm with both hands and tugged. “Come on. You’ve got to see this!”

Rose almost tripped twice, but Jo moved like a gazelle over the rough terrain. There was no
hesitation in her stride even when the Doctor almost toppled over. She cast an amused look over to Rose and grinned. That helped Rose relax; this might not be anything if Jo was so calm.

The jungle opened a little, but only just. Rose found herself standing at the base of a low hill that was covered in thick vegetation, but the tree coverage was thinner so that the sunlight could finally reach her. Tents were pitched around the base of the hill, and there were two small trucks with large wheels that looked even more serious than the gear that UNIT used.

“This is it!” Jo gestured at the hill.

“Overgrown pyramid?” the Doctor asked. His blue eyes were bright with glee. “Really?”

“We came across it a few days ago.” Jo shrugged. “Long story short, some of the vines were pulled away and exposed the stone underneath.” She waved her hands to hold off questions. “You don’t need that story, but we started digging it out. I’ll admit I was hoping for an archeological find, that can help in getting an area deemed protected.”

“Interesting,” the Doctor said. “But it isn’t the first pre-colonial structure found in the jungle. Not even close, so why call us.”

“Some of the artwork we found put me on alert. Come and take a look,” Jo said. “I’m not an expert, but I’ve been in the area for decades. There’s something very out of place about it.”

Rose was officially interested now. Her knowledge of pre-Columbian art was very limited. She could recognize the region, but not the exact culture from her time in Bolivia and various museums. Jo motioned them forward, and once they got around the tents, they could see a large section of exposed stone that had been cleared off. It was at least six feet tall, and even at a distance, it was very clear and sharp which made Rose a bit suspicious.

“How old is this?” Rose asked. She walked forward and leaned forward to better see everything. “It’s in good condition.”

“That’s not too surprising,” Jo said. “The dirt actually helped protect it from water and wind erosion.”

Rose was still frowning as she studied the pictures. There was a stylized landscape with humanoid
figures. Most interestingly, though was the ship in the sky above them. It was a long oval shape with almost horns on the sides. She really hoped that it was only a rough likeness. Jack and the Doctor walked up beside her.

“That’s interesting,” Jack said. “Aliens.”

“Likely,” Jo said. “I’m not an archeologist, none of us are.” Rose paused and looked around more closely at the camp. There were four large tents and only a couple of people in view. She didn’t see any jeeps or vehicles and was suddenly very sure that Jo had been traveling by river again. Jo shrugged and Rose turned her attention back to her friend. “I learned some caution in my time as your assistant.”

“How do you plan to explain us?” the Doctor asked. He looked far too amused.

“Nearby expedition.” Jo just smiled. “I can make it stick if I have to explain how you got here so fact. Though if someone wanders off, the police box might be a bit of a challenge.”

“I’m sure you’ll manage,” Jack said smoothly. “You certainly seem calm and in control.”

“Oh, you are a charmer.” Jo swayed closer to Jack and straightened the collar of his shirt. “If only I wasn’t married and about forty years younger.”

“I’m flexible.”


“There’s no writing for the TARDIS to translate.” The Doctor was examining the ship. “It wouldn’t be surprising that this culture was visited by aliens.”

“Aliens aren’t unknown now,” Jo said. “So, I’m not worried about that. Other than people not giving the indigenous people any credit.” She shook her head in irritation, and Rose wondered what she’d missed. “What I need to know is if it is dangerous?” Jo pointed to a section further down. “This part we only uncovered this morning, but it seems to show something being put into the pyramid.”
They all moved over. Rose wasn’t sure, but there was a clear step pyramid and the ship above it. There was something between the ship and the pyramid, but it was only a square shape that meant nothing to Rose.

“Did you alert UNIT?” Rose asked Jo.

“No,” Jo admitted. “I didn’t want to alert them until I knew it was dangerous.” She gestured around them at the thick jungle trees and vegetation. “We’re in the heart of the rain forest. Getting all their equipment in would mean cutting back the jungle and having troops stomping around. They’re good folk, but their operations aren’t exactly subtle.”

Rose nodded to herself, understanding Jo’s reasons. “If you tell me that it’s dangerous and urgent then I’ll alert them,” Jo promised. She even made an x shape over her heart. “Promise.”

The Doctor studied her for a moment but nodded. “Fair enough. But if I tell you get moving, get moving,” the Doctor said seriously.

“I will.” Jo rolled her eyes a bit. “I can’t run or crawl through vents as well as I used to.”

Rose held back a giggle, and the Doctor’s lips quirked into a smile. Jack was valiantly holding back laughter as the small woman beamed up at the Doctor.

“Alright,” the Doctor said. He pulled out the sonic screwdriver. “Let’s find the entrance and see what these aliens left behind.”
Rose cut through the dirt and vines carefully with her sword. She focused on any changes in the resistance of what she was slicing through. She could hear people moving behind her in the camp and the Doctor hovering close by. Every time the dirt shifted, more got thrown into the air and blew onto Rose’s face.

“What is that sword?” Jack asked. “I mean, seriously, what is it?”

“It’s a Star Knight blade,” the Doctor answered.

“Star Knight,” Jack repeated. “I think… I think I’ve heard of them, but I thought they were legends.”

“Nope.” The Doctor sounded proud, and Rose rolled her eyes. “Most of the swords are long gone though.”

“I heard there was only one Star Knight.”

“That would be Rose then,” Jo said. “Have her tell you the story. It’s a great one!”

Shaking her head, Rose pulled away a large chunk of earth from the stone and watched it crumble. The Doctor had insisted that the door was around here somewhere. Rose cut through another tangle of thick roots only to have her sword go far deeper than she was ready for. Stumbling forward, Rose found her sword buried to the hilt and knew at once that she’d found the entrance.
“Got something here,” Rose said. She tugged on her sword, trying to release it without much luck. Chunks of root and soil fell as the blade kept cutting through them. Sighing, Rose released the hilt and waited as the sword turned into a blur of gold and reformed as a bracelet. “Let’s try that again.”

“See, that is strange to see,” Jack said. “Is it nanobots?”

“Not sure,” the Doctor answered. “The sword was made by the White Guardian, and Rose won’t let me study it.”

“No,” Rose agreed. “I won’t.”

“It’s not like I’d hurt it,” the Doctor huffed. It was almost a whine.

“No,” Rose answered.

“Thing is,” the Doctor said. “There shouldn’t be a pyramid here. This is Brazil.”

“Exactly,” Jo said. “The Mayan were far north of here in Central America. The Aztec were in Mexico, and the Incan were in Peru to the west. We’re too far east.”

“Thought you said pyramids’ had been found in the jungle before?” Jack asked.

“Yes, but in Central American jungles,” Jo explained. “That’s why I wanted this checked out. The location is odd; it doesn’t fit with any local tradition. The peoples of this area never constructed things like this. So, when it’s revealed, the whole area is going to come under intense scrutiny.”

“And we can’t see the true shape,” the Doctor added. “So, we can’t narrow down which, if any, of the pyramid cultures might have built this.”

“Exactly,” Joe sighed. “I’m not an archeologist-”
“Trust me, that’s good,” the Doctor interjected.

“Don’t start,” Jo laughed.

Rose sliced again into the soil, and a huge mass of dirt and vegetation shifted. She jumped back just before the whole patch cam sliding off the pyramid like water off a duck. It tossed up dirt in a solid thump and whoosh, but it cleared fast. A space behind the soil had been revealed. With a few quick swishes of her sword, Rose turned the rough opening into a neater square doorway. She could just see the stone edge of the opening underneath the four-inch layer of soil.

It was very dark. Pitch blackness stretched out before them, and the heavy smell of stale air surrounded them. Rose lingered near the door, waiting for more fresh air to slip into the space while accepting that the Doctor wouldn’t wait forever. A cheerful manic grin had appeared on his face. She didn’t blame him for that. An interesting discovery with an old friend and no lives at stake.

“Jo, maybe you should stay-” the Doctor started to say.

“Nope,” Jo said. She stepped close to Rose and put her arm through hers. “Rose has her superphone if we need to send out an alert.” Jo nodded at the doorway. “I want to see this.”

The Doctor’s expression shifted. His eyes darkened, and his grin fell away as he tried to stare down Jo. Rose didn’t know what he was trying to accomplish. It wouldn’t work, and he really should know that by now.


Jack gallantly extended a hand to Jo. She took it dramatically and shifted over beside him. The Doctor gave Jack a warning look, but the younger man only smiled.

“Got the phone Rose gave you?” the Doctor demanded.

“Yes, sir.”
“Oh, you have a phone too?” Jo nodded in approval. “That’s good. Why did we do that, Doctor?”

“Because we were living in the 1970s... or was it the 1980s?” The Doctor shook his head. “Anyway, with the TARDIS locked by the Time Lords, I couldn’t get any.”

“Wait, Time Lords?” Jack asked. “They’re real?”

“They were.” The Doctor’s answer was short and clipped, the jovial mood fading a little. “But that’s not what we should be talking about,” the Doctor added with forced cheerfulness. “We’ve got a pyramid that no one has been inside for centuries.” He grabbed Rose’s left hand, and she gave it a soft, reassuring squeeze. “Shall we?”

“Let’s,” Rose agreed.

“One moment,” Jo said. “We need torches.” She gave the Doctor a firm look that clearly communicated ‘Stay’ and rushed off. Jack grinned but held in a laugh while the Doctor leaned closer to the interior wall to inspect the artwork in the low light. Jo was back a few moments later with an armful of large heavy-duty torches. She passed them around quickly.

“I’ve alerted the others that we’re going in. We’re lucky this pyramid has a low entrance. Not all of them do.” Jo switched on her torch and shined it down the entry. It stretched out beyond the light. “Now, frequently pyramids in this part of the world were mostly exterior structures. Most do not have interior areas, so this is already different than most.”

“Because someone stashed something inside,” the Doctor said. He was eying the long corridor with open interest. “Right, stay together or at least in your pairs if anything happens.”

The Doctor led the way with Rose beside him. The passage was just large enough for the pair of them side by side. They moved slowly, using their torches to light the walls. There were images of animals and people, but if there was a series of events to create a story, Rose couldn’t see it. Jo and Jack were close behind them, and so far everything seemed very normal.

“Nothing on the ship in here so far,” the Doctor said. There was a suspicious note to his voice.

“Scan for alien tech,” Jack suggested. The Doctor gave him a withering look. “Or not.”
“Where is your sense of adventure?” the Doctor asked.

“I thought you wanted me to learn caution,” Jack answered. He pouted. “This is why you like Rose better than me, isn’t it?”

“There are many reasons I like Rose better.”

“Yeah,” Jo muttered. “Like you’re in love with her.”

“I am not,” the Doctor muttered. “Stop it, this isn’t the time.”

Rose didn’t let the lie hurt her. She cast a look over her shoulder at the two troublemakers who were grinning with amusement and shook her head. At least Jack had the decency to look a touch embarrassed, but Jo just lifted an eyebrow at her. Then something moved overhead. Jo and Jack froze while Rose and the Doctor stopped a little further on. Everyone shined their lights around nervously.

“What the?” The Doctor spun around as the corridor shook. Over their heads, the ceiling began to lurch. “Run!”

It was too late. The Doctor and Rose rushed towards the entry as Jack and Jo turned themselves. Over the heads, something was shifting. Rose thought she heard gears turning and something sliding, but she couldn’t see what when she lifted her torch. Suddenly, beneath her feet, something gave way. She and the Doctor fell. A started scream escaped Rose as she hit a sloping rock and was hurtled down into darkness.

…………………..

The dust was thick in the air as Jack caught his breath. All of the moving had stopped, but Rose’s shocked scream echoed in his head. It had faded out, and he had a bad feeling as he reached for his torch. He was sprawled on the ground and shined the light down the corridor. There was no sign of the Doctor or Rose, and the closely fitted stones gave him no hints as to where the passage that must have opened beneath them was.
Climbing to his feet, Jack was grateful for his experience as a Time Agent. He’d been trained against panicking. Taking another step forward, he tested his weight on the stones underneath him. Nothing seemed ready to give, but this place was closer to a funhouse than a pyramid as far as he was concerned.

A groan made him turn back to Jo, who was panting and seemed dazed. Jack coughed from the dirt in the air and dropped to his knees beside Jo. The old woman was panting and leaning heavily against the wall behind her. He stopped just shy of touching her and brought up his left hand and the vortex manipulator. Activating the medical scan, he brought it up and began to scan Jo quickly.

“No broken bones,” he said in relief.

“No, no,” Jo said. “I’m alright. Just not as young as I used to be.” She began to laugh, the sound ringing down the corridor. Then she patted his arm. “Help me up.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m not staying here alone while you try to fetch help from outside,” Jo said. “Surely this isn’t the worse you’ve seen with the Doctor.”

“No, it isn’t.” Jack did as Jo said and slowly helped her to her feet. She was moving a bit gingerly but started stretching when she released his arm. “I doubt anything will top what was going on when I first met them.”

“Don’t say things like that.” Jo smiled at him fondly in the low light. “Never jinx yourself, Jack. The universe can be very creative. Looking back… it amazes me how much trouble we found on Earth while I was with him.”

“You didn’t go off-planet?”

“We did a few times.” Jo sighed and shook her head. “Honestly… I wasn’t very good at that side of things. Got homesick for Earth very easily, I’m afraid. Still, I had some good times. Sarah Jane actually went to my favorite planet a few generations after I did and was able to let me know how things had turned out. That was a fun conversation.”

“Sarah Jane?”
“I’m sure Rose will mention her at some point. There’s a lot of us, scattered around the world.” Jo glanced around them. “Well, which way do you think?”

“So, the Doctor travels with a lot of companions?” Jack asked.

Jo’s smile fell a little, and she nodded. “Yes, he does. He doesn’t like to be alone; he likes to see our wonder and joy at the things he sees. In return, we learn and grow.” Jo’s smile returned, but it was soft and a bit sad this time. “But things are a bit different now. Rose is different for him.” Jo fixed her eyes on him with a very serious expression. “And don’t think for one moment that he doesn’t care. He does. If you’re traveling with him, he cares about you.”

“We didn’t meet under the best circumstances. I did something stupid.”

“He likes you,” Jo assured him. “Trust me, he does. I’m telling you the absolute truth.” Her eyes twinkled a little. “I suspect I’ll be seeing more of you in the future.”

“We have to get out of here first,” Jack said. He aimed his torch down the corridor towards the entrance, but a stone wall was now firmly in place. “Serious,” Jack grumbled. He gently leaned Jo against the wall and walked over. Leaning against it, he inspected the seams and sighed. “Not sure how, but this seems locked into place. Whatever trap we set off is meant to keep us in here.”

“Not just keep us here,” Jo said. “Rose and the Doctor are missing.” She shook her head. “Hopefully the fall wasn’t too far.”

“I’m sure they’re fine,” Jack said reassuringly. He patted the new wall blocking their way and sighed. “Too bad he blew up the factory. My sonic gun would be real handy right now.”

“What did the Doctor blow up?”

“A factory that made these special sonic guns,” Jack said. “My battery is dead. I need a new one, but he’s not inclined to take me there.”

Jo laughed, not at all worried. “We’ll be fine,” she said. “You’re new to this, but trust me. We’ll get through it. Just keep your head.”
Jack smiled and shook his head fondly before extending his arm to Jo. “Okay then, what does the voice of experience suggest?”

“Well, that sword of Rose’s can probably get through it,” Jo said. “I suggest that we find them.” She nodded at the stone. “I don’t think we’ll be moving that.”

“Okay, but if you get tired.”

“Honey, I hike at least five miles a day,” Jo said. “I can handle this, but I promise to let you know if there’s a problem.” Jo dramatically drew an x over her heart. “Now, come on, let’s go. This isn’t bad enough for me to trigger an alert just yet.”

“What will it take to get an alert?”

“Trust me; you’ll know if something that bad happens.”

…………………..

Rose wasn’t in pain exactly. There wasn’t any sharp, throbbing pain and demanded attention and made her fearful of broken bones, but she was definitely suffering from bruises. Her chest ached from what had felt like rollercoaster pressures on it and then landing hard on a stone floor. Still, she started to move and make herself get up as the memory of what happened sank in.

“Rose?” The Doctor’s voice calmed her, and a large warm hand on her shoulder reassured her that she wasn’t alone. “Are you okay?”

“I think so,” Rose answered honestly. “Give me a second.”

She tried to look around, but the nearest torch was several feet away and pointed at a blank stone wall. The Doctor stood up, and she heard him moving cautiously across the room. The torch was grabbed, and the Doctor shinned it towards her. What appeared to be a solid stone floor was beneath them. It was perfectly smooth, and Rose ran her fingers over the surface curiously before slowly standing up. She wasn’t sure, but she didn’t think that a native population would have had the technology to achieve such a perfect finish.
The Doctor turned and extended his hand. Rose took it gratefully and leveraged herself to her feet. The air down here was stale, but so far, she was breathing okay. Looking around, she searched for any clues as to what had happened while still holding the Doctor’s hand.

“Thoughts?” she asked.

“Try to find the way out.”

“Any chance the sonic can help you with that?”

“Finding the way in is easy.” The Doctor smiled reassuringly at her. “The way out is trickier. I was scanning for weakness in the outer shell which a door would create. Inside…” He shook his head. “Not going to work. We’ll have to figure this out the old-fashioned way.”

“Right then.” Rose looked up at the ceiling. “I just hope that Jo and Jack are okay.”

“He’ll look after her,” the Doctor said.

“Look at you, already confident in Jack.” Rose hugged his arm. “That’s nice to see.”

The Doctor grumbled but didn’t entirely lose his smile. Nodding down the corridor, he and Rose began to search the walls for any activation mechanism before moving into another dark passage.
Rose’s phone rang less than two minutes after she was on her feet. Pulling it out, she chuckled when she saw the name and number. The Doctor glanced her way as she brought it to her ear.

“Hello, Jo. You and Jack, okay?”

“Yes. It is amazing to be able to call someone,” Jo answered. Rose hit the speaker option and held the phone between her and the Doctor. “Of course, I can only call you. Doctor, any chance I can convince you to supercharge my phone before you swan off this time? It would be very handy when I’m in less developed parts of the world.”

The Doctor smiled, Jo’s cheerful request reassuring him that she was fine. “We’ll talk about it? What happened with you and Jack?”

“Nothing really, Doctor,” Jack said. He sounded fine as well, and Rose released a small sigh of relief. “We fell to the ground at the force of everything shifted, but our biggest problem is that the exit is blocked.”

“Block how? Cave in?”

“No, it’s one very large stone that seems to have locked into place. We can’t move it.”

“I bet Rose could cut through it,” Jo added.
“Probably,” Rose answered. She sighed and looked around. “But we’re lower in the pyramid. There was a slide or something that dumped up below.”

“No sign of it now,” Jack said.

“This is not the usual Mesoamerican architecture,” Jo sighed. “And these traps are far more sophisticated than anything of the era.”

“So the aliens helped build it,” Jack said. “That makes sense if they left anything here.”

“We’ll look for a way up,” the Doctor said. “Jack, do you think it’s better or worse for you and Jo to remain in your location?”

“Worse!” Jo said quickly. Excitement colored her voice, and the Doctor groaned. “We’ll look around and try to find you.”

“Jack?”

“I’ll keep her safe,” Jack promised. “I don’t think I can stop her, short of tying her up.”

“You have my permission to do so,” the Doctor said.

“Doctor!” Jo scolded. “What would the rest of the Companion’s Club think?”

“They’ve all met you,” the Doctor grumbled. “I bet they’d understand.”

Rose couldn’t help it, she giggled, and the Doctor smiled a little. An answering laugh through the phone made them all feel a bit better. Then Jack cleared his throat.

“You and Rose try to find a way up; we’ll try to find a way down. What do you think, check in every fifteen minutes?”
“Yes,” the Doctor answered. “Stay together.”

“We will,” Jack promised.

“Be careful,” Jo added. “You two are more likely to find trouble than us.” She almost sounded cheerful about it. The Doctor rolled his eyes.

The call ended, and Rose exhaled loudly. Even that sound echoed a bit, and she shook her head. This place was difficult to wrap her head around. It wasn’t where a pyramid should be, deviated on standard pyramid architecture for the area, and served no clear purpose.

“I still don’t understand why this place is here,” Rose said. She shined the torch at the wall. There were more colorful paintings of animals, but nothing that seemed like a narrative. “There was a trap, but it literally brought us deeper rather than trying to kill us, so I’m not convinced that it was just a defensive measure.”

“Good point,” the Doctor agreed.

“Jack and Jo will be fine,” Rose said. She gave the Doctor a small smile. “He’ll look after her. Don’t worry about them.”

“I’m not worried about them,” the Doctor said. His voice was a little too high pitched.

“I’m sure.” Rose started to smile and raise an eyebrow.

The sound of shifting stones made Rose freeze in place. Thanks to the stones making the sounds echo, it seemed to be all around them. Summoning her sword, Rose held it at the ready and glanced around nervously for the first sign of something trying to move. The Doctor shifted closer to her.

“Not again.”

They didn’t have much warning. A large stone started to drop from the ceiling, other stones moving an inch to close the gap. It was dropping to block the corridor behind them, a corridor that Rose was suddenly very sure led up. Jumping forward, she slashed her sword at the stone,
determined to keep the path open and give them a way out.

Her sword hit the stone. There was a flash of light. An electric shock traveled up the blade and into Rose’s arm. The sword shuddered and sparked. Rose’s hand lost all strength, and the sword fell from her grasp. It hit the floor with a clatter rather than returning to bracelet form.

Gripping her head, Rose stumbled to the side and groaned as the pain lanced at her temple. Her stomach turned, and she was ready to be sick. The Doctor caught her, pulling her back against his chest and keeping her steady. Sighing in relief, Rose leaned back against him and closed her eyes against the flashing lights still plaguing her.

“Rose?”

“Hurt,” Rose managed.

“I’ve got you. I’ve got you,” the Doctor said gently.

“Sword.”

“I’ll get it,” the Doctor promised.

He lowered her to the floor, keeping a tight grip on her. Rose turned in arms so she could lean fully against him and rested her head against his shoulder. There was a scraping sound as the Doctor grabbed the sword and dragged it over to them. Rose didn’t immediately reach for it, instead deciding to stay against the Doctor. She didn’t look at the stone as she had a bad feeling that she’d accomplished nothing and gotten a migraine for it. The Doctor started rubbing her back, and Rose relaxed into the touch.

“I’m here,” the Doctor said. “I’ve got you.”

“What happened?” Rose finally managed. While leaning against the Doctor was nice, the floor beneath them wasn’t. It had a strong chill to it, and the stale air wasn’t helping her headache.

“Something overwhelmed the bracelet,” the Doctor said. “It has telepathic qualities.”
“Yeah,” Rose groaned. She snuggled even closer to the Doctor and smiled when he tightened his arms around her. That was nice. “This happened before,” she managed. It was hard to focus. “In New York City. At the Met. There were telepathic mummies. Apep’s mummies,” she amended. “Sword stopped working for a bit. I think…” Rose struggled to remember. “It's fuzzy.”

“Even with your shields, you still got hit with the backlash.” The Doctor shifted slightly, and Rose knew that he had to be looking around. “That’s not good.”

“So, I need better shields.” Rose was keeping her eyes stubbornly closed.

“Eventually, yes, but that doesn’t help us today.” The Doctor reached down and touched her cheek. “You’ve got a slight fever. Your body doesn’t know how to interpret what just happened, but you’ll be okay.”

“I know,” Rose sighed. She leaned into his hand. “You’re here.”

The Doctor’s ears reddened, but he didn’t pull away. “You know I can’t fix everything, Rose.”

“I know that.” Rose chuckled. “But between us, we do okay.” She furrowed her brow and pushed her way through the haze. “This will pass. It did in New York.”

“Just… just be careful,” the Doctor pleaded. When Rose nodded, he gently pulled his hand away and stood up. “But this does tell us something. The sword could only have suffered a backlash if these stones were telepathic.” The Doctor shook his head. “Of course, they can’t be themselves, but under the surface, there must be some kind of telepathic mechanism.” He reached out and touched the nearest wall. “But why? If that’s true then this whole complex is designed to read minds or at least some part of them.”

“Why is it here?” Rose asked. “Back to that question.”

“Maybe it’s to protect something deeper inside,” the Doctor said. “Activating to scare off people looking for it.”

Rose frowned. Something seemed off about that. She tried to think back to what had been going on
when they were separated from Jo and Jack. They had been bantering and teasing each other. If the temple had telepathic defenses, then why trap them inside the temple and not outside. That just seemed weird.

“Maybe a test,” Rose said. “Trying to determine worthiness to find whatever is here?”

“Maybe.” The Doctor huffed and glared at the walls. “Still seems a lot of trouble.”

“It is.” Rose sighed and leaned back a little from the Doctor. His sharp blue eyes checked over her face. “Still, we can’t just stay here. But clearly I can’t be cutting walls.”

“You’re in pain,” the Doctor said darkly.

“Headache,” Rose sighed. “I’ll be fine.”

“Rose-”

“No, really, I’ll be okay,” Rose promised. She reached towards her sword without hesitation. “Last time I went through this, I was dealing with an angry Osirian. This is much easier by comparison.”

“That does not make me feel better.” The Doctor shook his head. “What the hell triggered it?”

“Don’t know.” Rose’s fingers closed around the hilt of her sword. It was cold to her touch, and she sighed. “It can’t reset yet. I wonder how long it will take.”

“We’ll be fine,” the Doctor assured her. He kissed her forehead softly. “I’m sorry you’re in pain.”

“I guess it did tell us something,” Rose said. “But it limits our options for getting out.”

Her phone rang, the sound sharp and piercing to Rose’s ears. The Doctor grabbed the phone as she groaned and answered it gruffly.
“We’re find,” he said in response to something before putting the call on speaker. “Bad news is that Rose can’t use her sword here to get out.”


“The walls have some sort of telepathic field. Not sure how yet, but they caused an overload to the sword,” the Doctor explained. His tone was calming. “She’s alright.”

“Just a headache,” Rose said.

“Are you sure?” Jack pressed. “Telepathic backlash isn’t fun.” There was something uncertain in his voice, and Rose didn’t like that. “So, the sword is telepathic? What is it?”

“Old artifact,” the Doctor explained. “It’s telepathic nature helps it chose its wielder.”

“And gave me the knowledge to use it,” Rose added. The Doctor glanced at her, and she shrugged. “It’s not like I had fencing lessons as a kid, Doctor.”

“I’m glad you’re alright,” Jo said. “So, if the sword can’t cut us out of here, how can we get out?”

“There has to be a way out,” Jack said firmly. “Maybe higher up?”

“Maybe, it’s possible that there are openings higher up that we didn’t see,” the Doctor said.

“Openings at the top is much more common in Mesoamerican pyramids,” Jo added helpfully. “Not that we’ve found any staircases yet.”

“We did something to trigger the lockdown,” the Doctor said. “I’m sure of that, but what it was is still unknown. If you’re not in danger than keep looking around, carefully. We’ll keep going once Rose is on her feet. With luck, we’ll find something.”

“I always do.” The Doctor almost sounded offended by Jack even saying that. Judging from how Jack chuckled, he caught that too. “Check in again soon.”

“Yes, sir.” Jack ended the call.

Rose sighed and leaned against the Doctor again. She needed to get up and start moving again. The Doctor slipped her phone back into her bag and wrapped his arms around her. It was a much nicer idea to just stay here, leaning against him until she felt better, but Rose knew that sooner or later fresh air was going to become a real issue. Thanks to the thick layer of earth over the pyramid, it wasn’t exactly getting air circulation.

“I’m fine,” Rose said. “Let’s keep moving.”

The Doctor helped her up with careful movements. Rose stowed her torch in her bag. Soreness lingered in Rose’s limbs, but she was strong enough to support her own weight. Keeping a tight hold of her left hand, the Doctor glanced at the sword that Rose was carrying in her right hand. It was cold to her touch, and Rose hated it, but she gave the Doctor a tiny smile in an attempt to reassure him.

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s keep moving. So far, we seem to be getting forced deeper.”

Rose nodded in agreement, and they kept walking with the Doctor carrying their remaining torch. There were more paintings, but there still didn’t seem to be a narrative. It was almost like a recording of the animals of the area. There was nothing about the aliens or the ship or the pyramid itself which was very strange. If aliens had helped the locals build it, she would have expected them to be shown on more than just the outer wall.

Up ahead the corridor turned. They crept forward and peeked around the corner. There was a staircase leading down and a faint light just visible below. In the low light of their torch, Rose and the Doctor shared a look before they headed for the staircase.


“So this really is normal for them,” Jack said. “Somehow, even after meeting them, I didn’t quite believe it.”
“Believe it,” Jo said. “I’m glad he was with Rose. Ace told me about New York and how dazed Rose was, but she recovered quickly then so I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

Jack opened his mouth only to close it and shake his head a little. He shined the torch on another series of painting. “This is about the area vegetation.”

“Well, this pyramid has a marvelous local ecology record,” Jo said pleasantly. “And calling can wait a few more minutes. We won’t get anywhere if we keep calling them all the time.”

“Aren’t you worried?”

“A bit, but not as much as you.” Jo chuckled and shined her light towards Jack. “Stay calm.”

“Nothing fazes any of you.” Jack shook his head. “And I thought being a Time Agent made a person immune to surprise.”

“So, what is a Time Agent?” Jo asked.

“The Time Agency is future organization that monitors Time Travel.” Jack snorted. “Or tries to, at least. Given the way the Doctor bounces around without me ever hearing about him, I’m doubting the agency’s abilities. Agents are often at historical events to make sure things go as recorded. I had a few missions where I retrieved information or historical objects.” Jack shrugged. “All sorts of things on a sliding scale of morality.”

“You left?”

“Woke up one day with two years of my memory gone and no information about what had happened. I got the cold shoulder when I tried to figure it out.” A sigh escaped Jack, and he shook his head. “ Doesn’t really matter now, I suppose. I like the TARDIS.”

“Still, that’s a big violation,” Jo said kindly. “I can understand why it upset you.”
“It’s not that,” Jack said. He shuddered a little. “I wasn’t… I didn’t take the worst missions. There were things I didn’t do for the agency, but the loss of my memory makes me worry that maybe I did do the dirty work. Or something even worse. Or I tried to leave, and that was there way to keeping me.”

“I’m sorry.” Jo stepped closer and hugged him. For a moment, Jack was a stunned. It was a flirty hug like he was used to. This was a mom hug, and Jo was patting his back gently. “You’re out now. You’ll be okay.”

“Uh…”

Jo let go of him and gave him a smile. “And you might find out what happened someday. In the meantime, take heart that Rose knows you’re a good person, and you seem to be winning the Doctor over.”

“Thanks.”

“One more thing.” Jo turned her torch back to the dark passage before them. “Be careful talking about the Time Lords around the Doctor right now. Take you cues from Rose; she’s attuned to the Doctor’s moods.”

“So if they grounded the TARDIS, he must have history with them.” Jack moved up beside Jo, his body language changing. “You knew him back then. Did you ever see one yourself?”

Jo couldn’t help it, she laughed, and the sound echoed around them. “I did. Several times. There was one who was a right bastard called the Master.”

“The Master?”

“He kept coming to Earth back then to annoy the Doctor.”

“Really? When I was with the Time Agency, we could never get proof about them. They’re considered legends.”
“Well, in general the Time Lords didn’t interfere in the affairs of other species. Not unless it suited them of course,” Jo muttered. “It’s one the reasons the Doctor chose exile. None of that ‘we’re superior to all others’ stuff ever appealed to him.”

“Wait, wait, exile?” Jack stumbled and stared at Jo in shock. “He’s a Time Lord.”

“He is indeed.” Jo’s cheerfulness faded a little. “The last, at least for now.”

“What?” Jack was confused again. “What does that mean?”

“It’s not my place to say,” Jo said. She shook her head and patted Jack’s arm. “I’m a gossip, but I have limits. For now, you don’t need to know. Maybe someday the Doctor will be ready to tell you, or Rose will decide that you need to know.”

“I… okay.” Jack swallowed back his questions. Something in Jo’s voice warned him to be careful and told him that she was serious. “Still, that explains a lot about the TARDIS.”

“I rather imagine it does. I never lived in her, but I’ve heard a lot of interesting stories from the others,” Jo said. “Have you got a phone yet? If you have, I’ve got to give you a bunch of numbers. Rose isn’t as good at calling as she should be so maybe you’d be willing to us updated.”

Jack had a bad feeling about the sweet note in Jo’s tone now, but he smiled anyway. He rather liked this insane woman. The Doctor knew the best people it seemed if she and Rose were any indication.
The Doctor kept Rose close to him as they began to descend the staircase. The sight of her sword dull and unresponsive to her wishes worried him. Only the reassurance that this had happened before was keeping him from completely panicking. As it was, his mind was foggy as he tried to sort out what was happening here.

This pyramid didn’t belong in the area and clearly had been built by visitors to Earth. No civilization even today possessed this scale of telepathic technology. But so far, it was keeping them contained. It had only hurt Rose because she attacked. His grip on her hand tightened, and Rose swayed closer to him. He glanced her way, grateful that his Time Lord eyes let him see more clearly in the dark. Rose’s eyes were clearing and becoming sharper. She still looked tired, and a bit sick, but at least the effect was fading fast.

“I’m fine,” Rose said. Her lips quirked into a smile. “You don’t have to worry so much.”

“You’re my companion, that means that I worry,” the Doctor said. It was true, but it sounded a little cold and distant. Jo’s earlier words had bothered him, but Rose shouldn’t suffer his temper over it. “And I know how jeopardy friendly you are.”

“Ah, of course.” Rose smiled at him, her brown eyes glittering with the soft flecks of gold that he admired far too often. “Let’s just ignore how often I save you Trouble Magnet.”

“I’m not denying it.” The Doctor looked down at the stairs. More light was coming up, but it felt like they were going down much too far. “What about the stairs?”

“I’m fine,” Rose repeated. “I just wish I knew what was going on. I thought it was a defense
system, but now it seems to be leading us to something.”

“Good point.” The Doctor stopped on the stairs and shined his light around. There was no art here, just bare stone walls. “This place is a mess.”

“Yeah.” Rose panted a little. The air was getting a bit thin. “It is.”

“Rose?” the Doctor called. He moved closer, letting go of her hand in order to take hold of her elbow. “Are you okay?”

“Just a little…” Rose shook her head. “Just a bit out of breath.”

Her phone rang, and Rose almost fell as she tried to wrestle it out. The Doctor tightened his grip on her elbow and pulled her closer, frowning down at her in the low light. She was getting pale rather than bouncing back. He sniffed the air as he dug out her phone, realizing that the air was getting thin.

“Hello,” he answered gruffly, still studied Rose’s pale face.

“How’s it going, Doc?” Jack asked with forced cheerfulness.

“We found a way down,” the Doctor said. “Light is coming up. We’re going to go and check it out.”

“How’s Rose?”

“Fine,” Rose answered.

“Oxygen is thin down here now,” the Doctor said. “She’s not doing well.” Rose glared at him, but she couldn’t even manage to look that angry. “How’s Jo?”

“We’ve got the same problem up here,” Jack admitted. His voice was tight, and the Doctor’s hearts skipped their beats, thinking about Jo struggling to breathe. “We’re still moving, but it’s slow
“Jack, what about you? How are you doing?” the Doctor demanded.

“I’m okay for now. Genetic engineering for my ancestors made my body a bit more efficient,” Jack said. His voice was full of false bravado. “Honestly though, I won’t last much longer either.”

“Oh, understood. Stay with Jo where you are. There’s likely more air up there then down here.”

“This is crazy. Why build it like this?”

“There might be vents,” the Doctor said. “But at this point, they’re caked over with soil and growth.” He should have considered that, but he hadn’t expected the passage to seal behind them and block off any chance of getting oxygen. “Stop talking and breathe slowly.”

“Stop talking?” Jack laughed a little. “Have you met Jo?”

There was a huff on the other end of the phone, and the Doctor heard Jo protesting the insult. That made him feel a little better, but not much. As he hung up the call and returned the phone to Rose’s pocket, he started digging into his left pocket with his free hand. He and Rose returned their attention to descending the way too long staircase, but he was hoping to find something useful.

Why didn’t he have something useful? An oxygen tank was probably pushing it, but he really should have a couple of the oxitablets from 2504. They wouldn’t fill the pyramid, but they’d help at least. They reached the bottom and found an open doorway. The hallway was brightly lit now from small lights set into the stone. There was no mistaking this place for a native pyramid now.

Turning off the torch, the Doctor kept hold of Rose’s hand. She lifted her sword, and he saw it shimmer a little in the light. That might just be a good sign, but the sword wouldn’t protect her from suffocation if they didn’t figure this out.

……………….  

Jack hated it when the call ended. It was a small thing, but hearing the Doctor’s voice had calmed
him. Given how little time they’d spent together, that was silly, but it was true. He turned his
attention back to Jo, who was leaning heavily against the wall and taking slow measured breaths.
He was a trained Time Agent, and he was closer to panicking than she was.

“The Doctor wants us to stay here,” Jack said.

“Well, that’s nice,” Jo said. She pushed off the wall and slung an arm over Jack’s shoulder. With
their height differences, it wasn’t much good. “But that’s not going to happen.”

“Jo, we’re losing oxygen fast.”

“I’m aware.” She chuckled at him. “But either he’ll sort it out soon or he won’t. Trust me; he does
better with his companions nearby.”

“He’s got Rose with him,” Jack pointed out. “I don’t think he needs extra motivation.”

“Ah, so you’ve noticed?”

“I got the message pretty fast: hands off the blonde.”

Jo laughed at that before panting for air. Jack tried to take her back to the wall, but she shifted all
of her weight onto his foot.

“I’m an old woman,” Jo said. “And if I’m going to die here, then I’m damn well going to die in
action and not waiting it out.”

The walls around them began to grind as stones moved. Jack pulled Jo back and swung her up into
his arms, ready to run. Jo groaned and stretched out one hand, reaching for the wall. Jack didn’t
slow down, struggling to hold her and the torch. Jo adjusted her hand so that her torch lit the way in
front of them. He didn’t know what he was looking for. The Doctor and Rose had been taken down
by a slide, and they were still on the main floor.

“Stop,” Jo said.
He obeyed, and the woman frowned at a nearby wall. Her fingers stretched out once again, and Jo pressed her hand against the wall. Jack frowned, unsure of what she was doing, but not daring to interrupt. There were more small paintings on the wall, but nothing that stood out to him.

“I never regretted leaving the Doctor,” Jo said out loud.

Her voice echoed around them. Jack glanced around nervously, wondering what she was doing. The wall shifted. Jack heard more stones moving and grimaced, bracing himself for what would come next.

“What did you do?” Jack hissed.

“I lied.” Jo laughed softly before gasping for air.

The ground under Jack’s feet shifted. Jo held on tighter just before the ground vanished and they slid into Darkness.

…………………..

The lit room was small. There was no treasure chest or glowing orb in the center of it. There was a large black cube with softly glowing green lines crisscrossing it. The hum from it echoed off the walls and Rose reached out to touch it despite the Doctor hissing in warning. It was warm, but not hot. A machine of some kind.

“It’s an engine,” the Doctor said. “Probably the heart of this telepathic prison.”

“Is it the controls?” Rose asked.

“I doubt the controls are accessible since it led us down here.” The Doctor glared at it. “And I’m not sure what will happen if we destroy it.”

Rose nodded, but her head lolled against her will. Not waiting for her to protest, the Doctor led her
to the wall and gently set her down. Suddenly, Rose’s sword changed back to bracelet form, and Rose let out a soft sound of relief.

“Don’t use it,” the Doctor said firmly. “It won’t help.”

“No, it won’t,” Rose muttered. She lifted her head and frowned at the engine. “I think…”

“Rose?”

“You lied,” Rose said softly. “Earlier when we were with the others. You lied and triggered the pyramid’s systems. And before the stone fell and blocked us… you lied again.”

“I didn’t-” The Doctor froze, his eyes widening in alarm as he remembered. Rose almost smiled, slumping against the wall. “Oh…”

“Yeah,” Rose breathed. “Oh.”

He swallowed, unable to look at Rose and feeling his cheeks and ears heat up. The lie replayed in his head. It had been a simple denial, something he’d done in his own head and out loud a thousand times before. Beside him, the strange engine hummed and his mind whirled. Was it really that simple? Was that really the purpose of this place? That seemed impossible.

“I love you,” the Doctor whispered. He couldn’t look at her. Something both crushed him and lifted off of him at the words. “Jo was right. I love you.”

“I love you too,” Rose sighed. His heart jumped. He’d known, or at least he’d thought she might, but- “And that’s okay. I don’t need anything more from you.” Those words shocked him, but the temple didn’t move. No stones shifted to cut them off. Everything was still and quiet. “I know you aren’t ready for that kind of relationship, and I am happy with what we have now.”

The Doctor dared to look at Rose. She was smiling at him. Her eyes were a bit glazed over, but they were still focused on him. “I am very happy traveling with you. Even when we wind up in strange telepathic pyramids.”
“That’s not fair to you.” He lowered his gaze, guilt twisting in his chest. “Rose, I’m not… you shouldn’t waste your life waiting for me.”

“One, that’s for me to decide, not you and two, in what way is traveling through time and space with my best friend a waste of my life?” Rose shook her head fondly, her eyes finally clearing a little. “That’s a great life. A bit dangerous at times, but we help so many people and see so many wonders. I love it. Traveling with you, I love it.”

“Me too.” The Doctor swallowed. “Rose, I’m not sure how to fix this.”

“You really need a remote for the TARDIS,” Rose muttered. She leaned forward, slumping against his shoulder.

“Doesn’t work that way. And stop talking.” The Doctor touched her back of Rose’s neck gently and closed his eyes. “You need to conserve air, and I need to sort out-”

Jack came stumbling into the room, carrying Jo and panting. “Made it!”

“Jack?” the Doctor blinked in surprise.

“Jo?” Jack called, ignoring the Doctor. “Jo found them.”

Jo raised her head, blinking dull eyes, and the Doctor’s hearts stopped for an instant. She looked even worse than Rose. Both of them were trying to slip away, and Jack wasn’t looking much better. With great effort, he eased Rose’s head off his shoulder and rested it against the wall. Then he jumped up and rushed back to the engine. There was no obvious access panel.

“Is that what’s causing this?” Jack asked.

“I think so.” The Doctor ran a hand over it uselessly. “It has a telepathic hub. I can feel it, but I can’t influence it.”

“Oh,” Jo whispered. “We’re here.” She blinked and looked at the Doctor. “I think you have to tell the truth.”
“Uh… we uh figured that out, but it hasn’t let us go-”

“I missed it?” Jo frowned, almost pouting and the Doctor stared at her in stunned shock. “Pity, but I lied to get us down here.” She took a deep breath, struggling to get air. “I do regret leaving you sometimes,” Jo sighed. “Not so much now, but years ago, I regretted it sometimes. Every time Clifford and I had a fight or sometimes when life was too quiet.”

The Doctor blinked at her and Jo smiled at him. Then she slumped against Jack. The Doctor had only a moment to panic before the engine hummed. Grinding echoed through the room. He heard stones moving and tensed.

“Doctor?” Jack asked.

“Not sure.” The Doctor turned and scooped up Rose, noting with terror that she was barely breathing and her eyes were closed. “Just-”

The ceiling over their head shifted, unfolding the stones to form an open square. More stones above it shifted and then more and more beyond what the Doctor could see in the low light. Except then, sunlight spilled down the tall opening and fresh air flooded down to them. A sigh of relief escaped the Doctor, and he looked down at Rose as she shifted, well aware that his ears were trying red. Thank Rassilon, Jo hadn’t been in the room.
Unseen air vents pumped air down throughout the pyramid allowing the group to leave once Jo and Rose were back on their feet. Stones within the pyramid had reset themselves, opening passages up and letting them out. Without the use of slides, the foursome had to work a little harder to find their way out and climb up several different staircases.

The Doctor knew that eventually, the pyramid would reset itself again and wait for the first lie. He stayed quiet on the way out and let Jo’s soft chatter about her family wash over him. He didn’t even mind when she started recounting one of her adventures for Jack. At least it wasn’t about the time she met three versions of him at once. He wasn’t ready to field those sorts of questions from Jack.

If the pyramid hadn’t made him fear for the life of his companions, he would have been much more fascinated by it. As it was, he really just wanted to get away from it. He didn’t do vulnerability well anymore. He’d never been great at it, but now, in this body after everything that had happened, he couldn’t handle having his control stripped away.

Rose had stayed close and hadn’t tried to talk with him. They’d ended up holding hands, and she asked questions of Jo from time to time during the story. She laughed a few times along with Jack and the sound soothed some of his nerves, but made others bristle. How was she so calm? Why wasn’t she trying to talk about it?

Her words replayed in his head. The pyramid had accepted them as truth, but how - The Doctor couldn’t understand it. Something tugged at him, memories that he’d forgotten and couldn’t reach. He thought he might find the answer there, but couldn’t get to the solution. It was denied him. How could someone as bright, kind, and strong as Rose be happy with him?

Stumbling out into fresh air, the Doctor watched Rose tilt her head up towards the sun as Jo laughed happily. Members of Jo’s team rushed over, worry and confusion clear on their faces. They hadn’t been gone long, but their relief told part of the story. The Doctor supposed that the pyramid sealing the entrance and exit was something that was going to cause alarm. One of them was a woman with Jo’s nose, and the Doctor drew back, not wanting to be sucked into anything more domestic today. He was at his limit.

“We should scan the pyramid with the TARDIS,” the Doctor said. He coughed lightly as Rose raised an eyebrow. “Just to be careful.”

“Why didn’t you do that before?” Jack asked. The Doctor barely kept himself from flinching.
“Worth a shot,” Rose said. “Probably won’t work, but it might tell us more.”

“The TARDIS sensors are limited,” the Doctor explained. “And she’s telepathic, so those stones might cause a problem.” It wasn’t really the reasons he hadn’t scanned before, that just wasn’t his style, and Jack would learn that soon enough.

“Talking of that,” Jo interrupted as she rejoined them. “How are you, Rose?”

“I’m fine.” Rose raised her right hand to show off her bracelet. “It was only temporary. The fresh air is helping.”

“Still, that had to hurt,” Jack said gently. “I’m not telepathic myself, but in my time, humans are certainly more sensitive to telepathy.”

“And have better lungs,” Jo added. “When are you from?”


“Wow. You’re a long way from home.”

“Apparently.” Jack appeared overwhelmed for only a moment. As usual, he recovered quickly. “But I have to say that I’m liking the early 21st century.”

“It’s home,” Jo said simply. “I’ve always been revealed to know that we have a future at all.” She tutted softly and shook her head. “I should go and reassure my daughter and the crew that I’m alright. It gave them quite a scare.”

“Sorry about that,” Rose said gently. “We weren’t trying to get you into trouble.”

“I called you, remember; I knew what I was getting in for.” Jo started to turn away only to stop suddenly. “Oh, and you can tell Ace that I know she and Oliver are dating.”

Rose froze, her eyes widening and the Doctor’s head snapped to look at her. His eyes narrowed, and Rose’s amusement almost overcame her fear of Jo. She looked at the petite woman nervously. Jo might be older than her, but she’d hear about the woman’s combat record in UNIT especially since Rose knew that she wouldn’t fight back.

“Uh…” Rose wasn’t sure how to respond, and Jo laughed.

“Oliver has managed to make many trips to New York over the past year.” Jo shook her head affectionately. “Let me guess, they’re worried that I’ll start planning the wedding.”

Rose glanced at the period, wondering if you had to be inside for it to activate. “I might have promised not to confirm any detail that you might suspect.”

“Typical.” Jo shook her head. “I expected as much from Ace, but I would have hoped that Oliver would have had more sense.”

“Oliver?” the Doctor asked. “As in your son?”

“Yes, my son.” Jo grinned at him. “Oliver hasn’t stayed in a hotel the last few times he’s gone to New York, so I daresay that it is serious.”

“If I slipped up at any point, please don’t tell Ace,” Rose pleaded. “Please, she knows way too much about me and could probably kick my butt.”
“Only because you wouldn’t fight back,” Jo tutted. “And as for planning their wedding, I know that they’re going to elope. It’s in their natures.” Jo fixed her eyes on the Doctor. “And I know that Ace will alert you, so you have to come and get me, do you understand.”

“Jo-“

Jo stepped forward and gripped the lapels of the Doctor’s leather coat, pulling him down to her level. “You will come and pick me up, Doctor. Even if I’m dead by the time they get around to it. I have no intention of missing my son marrying a member of the Companion’s Club. It’s Sarah Jane and Johnny all over again.”

“Let’s hope not,” Rose muttered. “Though… if they do Vegas, I could probably ask Section 13 to provide security.”

“So, Doctor. Do you understand?”

“Jo that’s not-“

“This isn’t a discussion,” Jo said.

Jack was trying and failing to hold back his laughter. “I’m far too old to be in awe of you, and I am quite capable of putting my foot down. If Ace contacts you or Rose about her wedding to Oliver, you will come and get me.”

“Yes, alright,” the Doctor said. Jo released him, and he stepped back. “They might wait until you’re dead,” he grumbled.

“Hence my cunning plan.”

The Doctor blinked at Jo and slowly nodded. He didn’t remember her being that manipulative when she was younger. Maybe he’d just missed it, or maybe it had come with age. He remembered being a parent, but Jo had raised far more children than he ever had or ever world. It was possible that it was a defensive reaction.

The Doctor nodded towards the TARDIS, drawing back from the gathering group of people. Rose jumped forward and gave Jo and tight hug that the older woman happily returned. After kissing Jo on the cheek, Rose wandered after the Doctor, catching up with him quickly. It only took a moment for their hands find each other.

Jack watched them head towards the TARDIS and wondered if he was supposed to join them or not. Were they about to leave? He wasn’t sure.

“They’re a silly pair,” Jo said. She sighed dramatically and pouted.

“I’m not sure what I’m doing with them,” Jack admitted. He chuckled softly and shook his head. “They’re… I’m not sure.”

“I’m not going to pretend that I understand what it’s like traveling with the Doctor when he’s in love,” Jo said. She patted his cheek and smiled. “But trust me, when things go bad, having someone who stays calm and cares matters. Rose clearly likes you a lot.”

“Not the way I’d like,” Jack whined dramatically.

Jo rolled her eyes at him and shook her head fondly. “Don’t try to get in the middle of that, sweetheart. Trust me on that. The others and I have been watching that soap opera unfold for years
now.” Sighing dramatically, Jo fixed him with a serious look. “Give me your phone.”

Jack handed it over without a protest. “It’s a bit weird for me;” he admitted. “Primitive tech where I’m from, but I’ll be honest. The size and design aren’t bad. You can find it when you misplace it.”

“I suppose they’ll only get smaller in the future,” Jo said. She was eagerly entering numbers into the phone. “These are the numbers that I can remember… I can never remember the Jacksons’ number in India. Anyway, this will get you started.”

“Started?”

“If you need to talk,” Jo said. She leered a little. “Or have any new developments to report.”

“New developments?” Jack repeated. Despite feeling like he’d been hit by a lorry, he couldn’t help but be very amused. “Really?”

“I’m an old woman,” Jo whined. “And they really are adorable. Even if the Doctor would bristle like a hedgehog at that description.”

“I haven’t known him long, but that sounds about right.” Jack was grinning at the phone now.

“Or, you can call if you just need to talk,” Jo offered more gently this time. “I know you’ve got the training of a Time Agent and all that, but life on the TARDIS has it’s hard days too. So if you need to vent and don’t want to talk with Rose or the Doctor, you’re welcome to call me, sweetheart.”

The term of endearment caught Jack off guard. It wasn’t romantic or flirty. It was just warm and kind. Jack hadn’t heard that tone in a long time. After his brother—well, things with his mother had never gotten better. He blinked at her, and Jo laughed a little at his expression.

“Are you trying to adopt me?”

“Maybe a little,” Jo admitted. Then she nodded in the direction of the TARDIS. “Go and remind them that they didn’t properly say goodbye. Don’t let them leave without me getting another round of hugs.”

Jack saluted, smiling warmly at Jo and basking in her grin. He really liked this woman and could only imagine what the others were like. Giving one more look at the pyramid, Jack headed back down the small trail they’d used to get here and searched for the TARDIS.

The blue of the TARDIS was extra vibrant against the lush green of the trees and ferns behind it. Around them, the soft sounds of the rainforest were muted by the thick layers of vegetation, and the warm, humid air filled Jack’s lungs. A dull ache was still haunting him, and he had to admit that he’d been only moments from going down himself. Suffocation wasn’t a death he’d ever foreseen for himself and not one that was an attractive option.

The door was shut, and Jack knocked sharply on it. He exhaled again and dragged in a low slow breath, letting his lungs fully expand as he waited. For an instant, he was worried that no one would open the door; that after whatever confessions had to be made in the pyramid, the Doctor and Rose would just take off on him.

But then the door opened, revealing a smiling, but exhausted looking Rose Tyler. In the light of the pyramid, he hadn’t properly noticed how worn down she looked. Still, she smiled at him and started to step aside. The Doctor was leaning over the console and messing with the small screen. Judging from his shoulders, he hadn’t had any luck so far.
“Jo recruited you as a spy, didn’t she,” Rose asked in a soft voice. She couldn’t help but smile at the way that Jack was clutching his phone.

“No! Of course-”

“Jack, we literally just left a place that trapped us for lying.”

“She… might have.” Jack gave her a wide smile, clearly hoping to dazzle her into confusion. “She and the others just want to know that you and the Doctor are okay.”

“Oh, I highly doubt that’s all they want to know.” Rose rolled her eyes affectionately. “They are a bunch of gossips.”

“If they’re anything like Jo then I’d have to agree.”

“To be fair, Jo is the worst of the gossips and busybodies.”

“She’s great.”

“She’s bloody brilliant,” Rose said. Glancing at the phone, she smiled again. “Just… try not to embarrass the Doctor too much.”

“Right.” Jack smiled at her. “Did you find anything?”

“No,” Rose answered. Turning back to the Doctor, she called over. “Let it go, Doctor. Let’s go and say goodbye to Jo! She’ll never forgive you if we just take off.”

The Doctor grumbled, but left the controls, all but stomping over to them. Jack watched in a mixture of amusement and amazement as he mellowed as soon as Rose smiled at him. He felt a tiny jolt of sorrow that he’d never have a chance with either of them, but he could see what Jo and apparently the others saw. Rose beamed at him and nodded for the doorway. The three of them stumbled back out of the TARDIS and headed back for the camp.

“We were able to get a lock of the pyramid,” the Doctor explained. “But even the TARDIS couldn’t find that telepathic heart and I didn’t want to risk activating another defense.”

“Do you think that’s possible?”

“It’s always possible,” the Doctor said. “Though… we didn’t find bodies.”

“Why did you have to point that out,” Rose whined. She shuddered at the thought. “Let’s hope that no one ever died.”

Jack and the Doctor exchanged a disbelieving look over her head, both of them on the same page, but not saying anything about it. Holding back a laugh when he glanced down at Rose and found her pouting, Jack had to quickly avert his eyes and cough. A soft chuckle from the Doctor made Rose huff.

Jo was waiting for them near the end of the path. Her team were lingering nearby, and Jack noted quickly that her daughter was a very attractive woman. It was too bad that they were getting ready to leave. He had the feeling that the sexual tension in the TARDIS was only going to get worse.

“Find anything?” Jo asked.

“No,” the Doctor said. He shook his head. “Sorry I can’t give you more information. Odd to find something like that abandoned.”
“Pyramid that exalted the truth to the point of trapping liars,” Jo shook her head. “No wonder it got abandoned.” Rose snorted and put a hand over her mouth, so she didn’t laugh too loudly. Jo’s eyes twinkled. “And sadly, that probably means that it needs to be sealed off. I can’t imagine modern humans faring any better in there.”

“Still, I wonder why they built it in the first place,” Jack said.

“Maybe they were testing humanity.” Jo chuckled and sighed. “I doubt it took long to fail it if that was the case.” She looked at the Doctor. “Are you sure there’s nothing else? I still think it could be a defense system.”

“Nothing else stood out,” the Doctor said. He nodded toward the sod covered sides. “But alert UNIT anyway, Jo. Have them clean off the sides and warn them to be very careful around it.”

“And maybe take oxygen tanks in with them,” Jack added. Looking at the Doctor, Jack smiled and added, “You know, Doctor, we could go back and find out why they build this thing.”

The Doctor shivered at the idea. He wanted to run. Every instinct wanted to get away from this place that had made him so vulnerable. Shaking his head, he gave Jack a grin. “Nah, where’s the fun in solving every mystery.”

Jack and Jo didn’t look convinced, but Rose nodded with a soft smile. He doubted that she believed him either. Without thinking about it, he reached over and took her hand, drawing her a little closer. The action was immediately followed by a rush of guilt. Surely, he was leading her on every time that he did this, making her hope that someday things would be different. The Doctor knew better. If he was a stronger man, he’d let go of her hand and put some distance between them. He didn’t.

………….Coming Soon……

The Forest of Cheem
Rose loved their busy life in the TARDIS. The sentient time machine took care of most things, but it left Rose's dirty clothing alone most of the time, letting Rose have the simple task of laundry every few days. There was something in the simplicity of it that eased Rose. Maybe it was the memories of spending time at laundry mats with her mum playing little games to pass the time. Something about the smell of the detergent and the way that the clothing felt when she pulled it out of the dryer made Rose happy. Thus, she was in the small laundry room that the Doctor swore hadn’t been there before she moved it and was almost done folding when Jack poked his head in.

“There you are!” Jack jumped up next to her and eyed the laundry. “Doesn’t the TARDIS do this? The Doctor swears she can do anything.”

“I enjoy it,” Rose said. She shrugged. “It’s relaxing. Resets my brain in a way.”

“There are better ways to do that,” Jack teased. He wiggled his eyebrows and Rose shook her head in amusement, failing to hold back a smile.

“Not going to happen, Jack.”

“Not with me, trust me, I got the message of hands off the blonde when you saved me.” Jack leaned against the dryer, watching Rose with intense eyes. “But you could give it a try with the Doctor.”
“I was wondering when you’d bring this up.” Rose held back a sigh.

“He loves you,” Jack told her in a soft hushed voice as if he was afraid of the effect saying the words aloud would have. There was a softness to his voice and a sincerity that Rose wasn’t sure she’d ever heard from the former Time Agent before. Not even from his future self. “The way he looks at you when he thinks you can’t see. When your back is to him in the library while you paint… he reads from memory and just watches you. The way he looks up through the grating when we work on the TARDIS at you Rose… he’s completely in love with you.”

“Oh, Jack.” Rose smiled softly as she looked at her friend and saw the man he’d be shining through once again. “I know that already. I’m in love with him too, but you know that.”

“Jo and I figured that’s what had to be discussed in the pyramid,” Jack admitted. “But nothing has changed!” Frustration was creeping into Jack’s voice. “If you know and he knows, then why all the dancing around each other?” Jack demanded with a truly confused look. “I know you love him, Rose, you’re fairly direct in that in everything but saying it out loud. Even he knows it so just…”

Jack waved his hands about. “Why?”

“Our timelines are messy Jack,” she explained with a soft sigh. “We aren’t in the same place in our relationship. Someday we will be, but I need to let him decide that I’m what he wants. It can’t be because he’s preserving timelines or because he wants to make me happy so I’ll stay. I need it to be because he wants to be happy with me. We did have to talk about it a bit in the pyramid and we both admitted it to each other, but he’s not ready yet.” She looked towards the door and sighed. “Trust me, I don’t love that we’re in this holding pattern, but I’m not going to push him into something he isn’t ready for.”

“How can you cope?” Jack’s voice a bit whiny. “The sexual tension is threatening to kill me!”

“Trust me, if it weren’t for the out of synch timelines, I’d have jumped him by now.”

“Wait…” Jack stared at her before he laughed and grinned at her. “Out of synch timelines… Rose. you little minx! You’ve already slept with him.”

Refusing to be embarrassed, Rose raised an eyebrow at Jack and shrugged. “I dated him all through uni, Jack, I think it’s pretty much a given that it wasn’t a chaste relationship.”
Jack gaped at her looking like he was torn between shock, squealing, and demanding details. Before he could get anything more from her, Rose scooped her clean laundry into the basket and headed for the hall. Admitting all that to Jack was dangerous given that he’d now met Jo, but it made her giddy to say such things out loud and not just keep them inside. She flipped her hair over her shoulder and grinned when a strange happy sound escaped Jack, but didn’t stop moving. The Doctor was in the hallway and stopped to give a strange look towards the laundry room before looking over at Rose.

“Jack’s being a bit weird,” Rose offered with a smile and shrug. “So where are we off to today?”

“Hadn’t decided,” the Doctor admitted. He gave Rose a soft smile, his eyes bright and his cheeks reddening a little. “Thoughts?”

“Well…” Rose pressed her lips together thoughtfully. “There is something that has stuck with me.”

“What?”

“Remember Jabe? The tree woman who was a descendent of the tropical rain forest?”

“Bit hard to forget her.”

“Our first date,” Rose said happily. The Doctor’s blush deepened and Rose told herself to ease off. “I was thinking that it could be really interesting to see where she is from.”

“The Forest of Cheem.” The Doctor nodded and glanced towards the console room. “Good plan. Get ready and tell Jack to get his head on right.”

“On it!”

Rose snapped a small salute, making the Doctor roll his eyes and headed back to the laundry room. Jack was texting on his phone and Rose inwardly grimaced. She had officially lost him to the dark side. That was something his future self hadn’t warned her about. When she poked her head in, Jack’s eyes widened like a deer in headlights, but he quickly recovered and gave her a charming smile.
“Don’t,” Rose said. “Just don’t.” Now she was holding back a laugh. “We’re planet-bound. Get ready.”

Jack nodded, a wave of serious and excitement sweeping over his features. Reassured, Rose headed to her room to put away the laundry or at least get it on the bed. The TARDIS jolted a little as she walked and Rose nearly stumbled. Increasing her pace, she jumped into her room and noted with relief that it was far more stable. The shaking always seemed to be tied to the console room and nowhere else which was just as well given that they had a pool. She really wasn’t sure if it was intentional or a side effect of something.

Putting down the basket, Rose went to her wardrobe and opened it to find comfortable jeans and a red long-sleeved shirt along with her crème coloured coat. She quickly swapped out and pulled on her trainers. By the time she got back to the console room, Jack was helping the Doctor fly and trying to flirt with the Doctor.

“Rose! Hold down that button!” the Doctor barked.

Rose didn’t argue. She rushed forward and pressed the button in question. More orders came and she and Jack did as the Doctor said. Some of the controls were becoming more familiar to Rose and a few times, she moved before the Doctor instructed her to. The shaking eased and the Doctor beamed as they landed almost smoothly.

“There were go. Billions of years into the future! Earth’s been roasted, but life goes on.”

Jack’s features tightened for a moment at the mention of Earth being roasted. She supposed that even if he’d been raised on another planet, it was still the homeworld and the idea of it being gone was strange. But he recovered quickly and reached for the scanner.

“Atmosphere is perfect,” he announced. “Bit chilly today.” He glanced at Rose’s coat. “Which the TARDIS must have known.”

“Course she did,” the Doctor said proudly.

“You may want a jacket yourself,” Rose suggested. He had one a simple dark blue Henley that she had to admit looked really good on him.
“Back in a sec!”

Jack ran from the console room with a boyish grin on his face. He already looked younger than when they’d picked him up. The Doctor watched him for a moment. The suspicion was gone, but Rose could tell that he still wasn’t completely comfortable with Jack. But it was still progress and she’d take it. When Jack returned, he had a brown bomber jacket on and looked very pleased with himself. It was a vaguely familiar jacket and Rose hoped that she’d never seen it on Athena or Melody.

“All yours,” the Doctor said. He was smiling at Rose and gestured grandly towards the door.

She didn’t need any further encouragement. With an answering smile, Rose went to the door and paused. Another new planet, in a time long after her natural lifespan. That familiar excited itch traveled up her spine and Rose savored it. Opening the door, Rose started to smile as the thick smell of earth and flora hit her nose. Soft sunlight flickered around her as she stepped out into a thick jungle. Behind her, Rose heard the Doctor chuckle at her slow exit, but she ignored him. A new world, billions of years in the future and she was here. That was worthy of awe.

Looking around, Rose grinned at the sight of the massive trees that towers over her. They were a bit different from what she was used to with large roots that protruded from the ground in spots and wide branches that were far larger than anything she’d seen before. Ivy and vines crisscrossed around their trunks and the wind that rustled the leaves didn’t move the solid branches or trunks at all.

On the ground were thick patches of vegetation that had accents of bright colors that contrasted with the sharp natural green. A fern was mostly green but had unusual red patterns on its leaves. Bright violet flowers growing at the base of one of the trees looked similar to orchards, but the style was a little different. She pulled out her phone and took a quick photo of the alien flowers to send to her mum. Then for good measure, she took a few reference shots for a painting. Craning her neck back, she looked straight up, marveling at the way the branches and leaves framed a small opening that let sunlight pour through the thick canopy and revealed a patch of blue sky beyond.

“It’s beautiful here,” Rose said. She looked back at the Doctor and Jack who were peering around with small smiles of their own.

“So, they’re living trees that live in a forest?” Jack asked.
“They are living trees,” the Doctor agreed. “Sentient and sapient descendants of trees similar to these. They inhaled carbon dioxide and exhale oxygen.” The Doctor smiled and touched a nearby tree with a soft, almost reverent smile. “But that’s not to say that there are still younger species of trees that aren’t sentient, at least not yet. They surround themselves with them. The Cheem is one of the most biological diverse planets in the galaxy at this point.”

“Naturally?” Rose asked. “Or not?”

“Not, actually.” The Doctor removed his hand and turned back to his companions. “Almost a million years ago, this was a colony planet settled by the Forest. It was all but dead at that point, a carbon dioxide atmosphere and nothing naturally living on it any longer. They oversaw the terraforming, using their own bodies to start the process of creating oxygen, planted older trees to help them.” He gestured at the ground. “Jabe’s people rely on what they draw out of air, they don’t really use their roots anymore and don’t mention them, Jack,” the Doctor added firmly. “After there was an oxygen atmosphere, they made the planet a haven for dying species. Lots from Earth for example.”

“Impressive,” Jack said. “So the whole planet is a preserve?”

“No, there are cities.” The Doctor glanced around. “We’re a bit off from a city. Let’s try to get a bit closer.”

Jack looked like he was considering teasing the Doctor about driving, but his curiosity overruled him. Rose eyed one of the trees and lifted her eyes high into the towering branches. It was a bit odd to think that a being like Jabe coexisted with something so like her ancestors. Then again, she reminded herself, she coexisted with apes who were cousin species to her. Letting the Doctor round her and Jack up in the TARDIS, Rose went straight to the screen and waited eagerly as the Doctor adjusted the controls.

“Just a quick special jump,” the Doctor assured them. Rose and Jack exchanged a smile. “Hold on.”

The TARDIS shuddered once, but that was it. Beaming the Doctor swung back to the door and threw it open, gesturing for them to follow. They gathered around the center console and the Doctor hit a few buttons. The TARDIS shuddered for a moment, but only a moment. Jack pushed the screen, letting the Doctor catch it and turn it on.

“There we go! City!”
Nodding to the Doctor, Rose returned to the doors and opened them. Rose had expected a city unlike the ones she was used to. She’d had just enough time to imagine wooden buildings wrapped around the massive trees, but it was nothing like that. They were in a square built from polished stone and large buildings that appeared almost entirely made of glass surrounded them. The sun gleamed off of the smooth sharp planes of the architecture as Rose’s mind caught on that they were like greenhouses. Trees grew through perfectly round holes in the stone floor of the square with small grooves that must be for carrying water. In the center, a few feet from them, was a large fountain with a statue of what looked like a wolf. Rose swallowed, but inhaled slowly and kept looking around.

It didn’t take her long to realize something, something important. She didn’t see any of the tree people. The city was empty. Stepping out, she turned around and searched the doorways of the glass buildings and the skywalks that stretched out between the buildings. There was no sign of anyone.

“Doctor, I think there’s trouble,” Rose said.

The Doctor stepped out beside her. “Why?”

“Where is everyone?” Jack asked, joining them in front of the TARDIS.

“Ah.”
The quiet of the city only made the wind louder. Judging from the massive open areas and lack of roads, this was a city that was normally full of foot traffic and maybe even small markets. Yet, the sun was glittering off of the smooth glass angels of the buildings and there was no one but them to see it. Through the glass in different buildings, Rose could see more greenery and thought she saw movement once, but most of the glass was darkened to keep her from seeing inside.

“Do we think it’s empty or just in lockdown?” Jack asked. His friendly tone was gone and instead the voice of a soldier ready for orders had taken its place. “My scanner isn’t picking up anything harmful to us.”

“TARDIS would have warned us if it was something that simple,” the Doctor said. He took a few steps forward and looked around. “No damage to the buildings.”

“No,” Rose agreed. She narrowed her eyes up at one large window. “I think… I think there might be people inside. No one is near the window, but I think I saw movement up there.” She pointed at the window in question.

“Maybe,” the Doctor agreed. He nodded forward. “Come on, let’s take a look around. Might be a festival across town that everyone is at. Or a sporting event. Doesn’t mean it’s anything bad.”

That was a valid point, but Rose could tell that the Doctor didn’t believe it. She looked up as they walked, checking the windows that were still clear. Sometimes, she thought she saw something move, but no one came to the windows. They didn’t go far, just down the street from the TARDIS. Jack tried to open one of the massive glass and metal doors, but it was locked up tight.

“What do you think, Doc?” Jack asked. “Sonic our way inside?”

“No.” The Doctor pointed up ahead at a building with a large sign in front of it. “These are residences by the looks of things, that’s a public building. If people are hiding inside, let’s not terrify them just yet.”

The building in question was a bit different from the others. It was still built like a massive greenhouse, but there were unfamiliar pieces of equipment mounted on the side. Rose was able to glimpse a balcony high above their heads that was filled with large machines. Solar panels lined one side of the building and the sign proclaimed it “Central Forest Health.” Through the glass doors, Rose could see trees and lots of plants around a wide walkway that curved quickly out of view. There was no reception desk or anything that was familiar to her as part of a government building.
“Now this is more like it,” the Doctor said. He inspected the doorway and located a panel beside it. “Doorbell.”

Jack and Rose exchanged a look as the Doctor rang the doorbell. It seemed a bit odd to Rose, but she reminded herself that this was over a billion years in her future. Jack kept shifting between his feet, a picture of nervous energy and turned to check behind them again. They were still alone.

But then something moved inside and it kept moving. Rose leaned forward as a tall tree dressed in something like medical scrubs came around the curve of the walkway. It looked a lot like Jabe with dark brown bark skin, hints of greenery near the top of its head, but it was taller than Jabe had been. They stopped and stared out at them. The Doctor raised a hand and waved, sending the poor tree further into shock. Suddenly, it dashed forward and the doors slid open.

“What’s happened?”

The tree narrowed dark brown eyes at the Doctor for a moment before looking at Jack and Rose. Then it released the Doctor and sighed. Shaking its head, it stepped back and lowered its arms. Jack shifted closer to Rose protectively and Rose rolled her eyes. She really hoped that he eased off this routine soon.

“I apologize,” the tree said. “Things have… things have not been going well for our people.”

“What’s happened?” the Doctor asked. “Who can I speak to? I can help.”

“Lady Jabe is overseeing—”

“Jabe!” The Doctor grinned. “Perfect, where is she?”

The tree blinked at them and Rose stepped forward and smiled. “Sorry that we startled you. What’s your name?”

“Jacin.” The tree looked at her and blinked. “Uh… please follow me. If you think you can help then I suppose there’s no harm in letting you in.”

As Jacin let them past, Rose realized that they were actually in a small room with another set of clear glass doors separating them from the lush greenery inside. Jacin pressed a button beside the door. There was a loud clicking sound that made Rose jump. She looked up at the Doctor curiously.

“Disinfectant,” the Doctor said. “Probably to protect the plants inside.”

“Yes, you might be carrying something,” Jacin said. “It’ll just be a moment.”

Suddenly the room was flooded with sharp sprays of bubbles that hit Rose all over. She jumped again while Jack laughed. The Doctor crossed his arms and tried to look dignified as pink bubbles dripped down his nose. Air followed and Rose watched the soap begin to vanish from her skin and clothing. Her hair flew around her and she wrinkled her nose at the odd feeling. Then it was finally over and the inside doors slid open.

“This way,” Jacin said as if they hadn’t just gone through a car wash.
The Doctor glanced her way and grinned at the expression her face. She glared at him and he only smiled wider. Jack knocked her shoulder as he passed and winked at her. Rose followed a moment later, her curiosity overriding her distaste.

She’d been expecting it to be humid inside, but it wasn’t. Instead, the air was thick with the smell of soil and a hint of something that Rose couldn’t identify. There was a great variety of trees in the building and the path forward curled around thick trunks and large ferns. Small screens near some of the trees had charts that seemed to be tracking water intact and health. She wasn’t sure how closely the health of these trees and the walking trees were connected. She wasn’t sure of the life cycle of Jabe’s people either. Did they grow out of the large old trees or was it more like what she was used to?

She was snapped out of her thoughts when they came to another doorway that hadn’t been visible until just before they reached it. Ivy was growing over this wall and close around the door making it almost impossible to even see beyond. Through the small patches that were open, Rose could see three more tree people inside of the room. Jacin did something and the doors swung open, making the ivy leaves flutter. Once inside, Rose could see that the room was some kind of lab with machines she recognized as computers, small growing pods, and tables with various samples spread across them.

“We have visitors,” Jacin said.

The figures turned and Rose smiled when she immediately recognized Jabe. Gone were the long red robes and instead she was wearing a simple pale green tunic and pant combination similar to scrubs and a dark green lab coat. Her eyes widened at the sight of them and took a slow step away from her terminal.

“Doctor?” Jabe asked. She blinked at him in surprise and then looked at Rose. “Rose? I- I am surprised to see you again.”

“They just arrived,” Jacin said. He was eying them suspiciously again. “Do you know them milady.”

“Yes, we met on Platform One, during Earth’s death,” Jabe answered. She took a cautious step towards them. “I owe them my life. But why are you here?”

“Rose wanted to see the Forest of Cheem,” the Doctor answered. “But we seem to have arrived at a bad time.”

“You could say that,” Jabe agreed. She gestured behind her to the samples. “Something is happening in the forest to the older trees. It might be some kind of disease, but we have only a few samples.”

“You haven’t gotten more?” Jack asked.

Jabe smiled softly at him and Jack stepped forward. In a graceful movement, he took Jabe’s hand and kissed it delicately. “Captain Jack Harkness.”

“Not the time, Jack,” the Doctor said. “They haven’t gotten more samples because whatever is affected the trees could spread to them.”

“Exactly, Doctor,” Jabe said. She was still smiling at Jack. Then she shook her head and turned her attention back to the Doctor. “Not that I’m not grateful to see you,” Jabe said. “But what are you doing here?”
“Rose was interested in seeing your home,” the Doctor answered.

“Didn’t you detect the warning beacons?” one of the other trees asked, sounding suspicious.

Jabe smirked a little, her dark eyes brightening with humor. “Their ship is somewhat different, I expect,” she said. he gave the Doctor a gentle and fond look. “Still, I fear that this is not a time for sight-seeing.”

“What is going on?” Rose asked.

“Forest trees are dying,” Jabe answered. There was a quiver in her voice. “Many of the oldest and stronger trees have suddenly died and we haven’t been able to figure out why.”

“Disease?”

“We aren’t sure. Our first tests didn’t find anything,” Jabe explained. “No signs of burning or chemical attack.”

“Could it be something genetic?” Jack asked. “Some faulty mutation?”

“We can’t rule that out,” Jabe answered. “But the effect seems to be spreading. We know the area where is started, but there are signs of the problem in other areas. As you said, Doctor, we’re concerned about it affected our people and thus most are hiding.” Jabe hesitated and then sighed. “Several teams went into the forest to try and gather more information, but they have not returned. We’re afraid that they might be dead from whatever this is.”

“So it might already be jumping to your people,” the Doctor said. He shook his head and then smiled. “Well, we aren’t trees. If it is a disease or some kind of outside force it won’t affect us.”

Jabe smiled. “I was hoping you would offer. You are correct, as mammals, you won’t be affected by the same things that harm us.”

“Do you have any scans of the area?” the Doctor asked.

Jabe shook her head and gestured towards another door on the far side of the room. As she started walking, the Doctor grabbed Rose’s hand and they followed close behind her.

“The area where the worst effects are happening is in a natural ravine. We’ve always had trouble monitoring the area and it’s gotten worse lately. I’ll be blunt, I don’t know what you’re going to find out there.”

“We can handle ourselves,” the Doctor said.

“I know.” Jabe opened the door and they headed towards the back of the building. “I just wish that I had more to tell you. As it stands, no saplings are allowed outside and the trees are avoiding any outside air. It’s a bad state of affairs. Our lights provide some nutrition to us, but it’s no substitute for staying inside full time.”

They paused long enough on the stone path to let Jabe ducked into a storage room. Rose’s mind whirled as she tried to take in everything that had been said so far. It was nice not to have to prove that they were capable of helping, but the speed in which Jabe was sending them off spoke to how worried she was. Jabe returned with a large canvas bag that she handed to Jack.

“This is a sample pack. It has everything you will need.” Jabe looked at Rose and sighed. “I’m sorry that I’m not in a position to entertain right now, but we can’t do anything without
information.” She paused and pressed her rough lips tightly together. “Would you like a firearm?”

“No,” the Doctor answered immediately.

“Doctor, there is a very real possibility that this is intentionally being done by some unknown enemy.”

“We’ll be alright,” the Doctor assured her. “We’ve got Rose.”

“Somehow I’ve become the bodyguard,” Rose teased.

Jabe didn’t look any happier in that moment but nodded her understanding. The other trees who were following behind them just seemed confused. Rose understood the feeling. Jabe rattled off several species names and a couple of chemical names to the Doctor as they walked that meant nothing to Rose. It was a sharp reminder just how far in the future they were.

The back of the building was very similar to the front with a large sign visible through a set of glass doors. Rose once again noted that there was a small chamber between them and the backdown. Apparently, they had to go through the cleaners again. Outside the back of the building there was a small vehicle waiting for them.

“The hover cart is the best vehicle to use in the forest,” Jabe explained. “It’s narrow enough that it can navigate between the largest trees and won’t harm the foliage.”

“Great!” Jack adjusted the sample bag. “So, the plan is just to grab samples?”

“That’s what we need the most,” Jabe admitted. “Please be careful. I’m sorry that I have to ask you to do this.”

“You didn’t ask,” the Doctor said. “We offered.” He glanced at the cart. “Does it need keys?”

Jabe blinked at the question, apparently very surprised. “No,” she answered with a soft chuckle. “Nothing like that. Can you drive it?”

“Course.”

The Doctor didn’t give Jabe any time to worry about it. He opened the door and gestured Rose and Jack into the decontamination chamber. Jabe backed away as the door shut and waved to them. Rose had only a brief moment to see the guilt on the tree’s face before she was blasted with soap. Nervousness churned in her stomach as she blinked and focused on the line of trees watching them. Worry radiated off all of them and Rose couldn’t help but feel a flicker of fear for what was happening in the forest.

The hover cart had two seats in the front with sloping sides that then became a flat cargo area. There were small rails and straps for securing whatever it might carry. Small panels on the underside glittered in the sunlight and Rose suspected that they were the ‘hover’ part of the vehicle. A small screen sat in the middle of the front dashboard with a steering wheel on the left side like an American car. Grinning, the Doctor hoisted himself up into the cart and sat behind the wheel. Jack gestured for Rose to climb up into the second seat. Giving him a smile, Rose let Jack help her up and strapped herself in. She took the sample bag from him and secured it in the empty space between her and the Doctor’s seats.

Jack climbed in and said he was ready. With a smirk, the Doctor revved up the cart and they took off. Jack yelped behind them which quickly turned to excited laughter. Twisting around, Rose looked back to find Jack holding onto straps with his feet firmly planted like he was water skiing.
He caught her looking and grinned widely at her.

It took them no time at all to leave the city behind. Instead of the shift from urban to suburban that Rose was used to, this was a sharp cut off. The city simply ended with the stone floors transforming into dark soil and rich undergrowth. Looking back, Rose watched the glass buildings become smaller and smaller and bit her lower lip with worry. It still looked empty. How many people were hiding deep in their homes, too afraid to even approach the glass? It wasn’t a pleasant thought.

Of course, they took Rose down the ugly rabbit hole of having to wonder if this was natural or something else. Environmental films were something she’d grown up with and a nagging suspicion that this was on purpose had taken hold. Still, it was too early to make assumptions.

They drove into the forest, the wind tugging at Rose’s hair and Jack laughing behind her. The Doctor navigated them carefully around the large trees and the thick growths of ferns. Rose watched their surroundings carefully, trying to take note of anything that looked out of place, but all the trees were just a little too different from what she was used to after a billion years of evolution and genetic engineering for her to know what wasn’t right.

The car followed a steep slope and the sides of a natural rocky ravine rose up around them. Everything got darker as the trees and rocky sides blocked out much of the sunlight. The temperature even dropped. Rose shivered at the sudden change but quickly resumed her examination of the area. Something smooth flashed between two trunks. Rose straightened. She saw it again between another set of trees. It was a tall metallic wall.

“Doctor! There’s a building over there!”

“What!” The hover cart stopped sharply. Jack had to grab onto their seats to catch himself. “It’s not on the map.”

The cart gently lowered itself until it was hovering only a foot or so off the ground. Now that they were stopped, Rose could see it very clearly. It wasn’t massive, but it was there. A building with smooth metal walls that was about the size of a small house. It looked to only be one story, but the soil around it was dark and the vegetation had been stripped away.

“Well, that shouldn’t be here,” the Doctor murmured. He jumped out of the hover cart and looked back at Rose. “Fancy a look?”
The building wasn’t large, but Rose couldn’t understand how it could have been built without anyone in the city knowing. They were less than an hour from the city proper and with the technology that had to be in place given what she’d seen on Platform One, it just didn’t seem possible. The sides weren’t exactly metal despite the sheen to them as they weren’t reflecting sunlight.

“No guards,” Jack said. “And no visible cameras.”

They had parked the hover cart a ways from the building, moving it after Rose had pointed out the building. If someone was watching then they would have already been seen. But there was no movement.

“Is it possible that Jabe just forgot to tell us about this building?” Jack asked.

“It doesn’t match the architecture of the city at all,” Rose said. “Their buildings are smooth curves, glass, and some sharp angles. This is a box.”

“Rose is right,” the Doctor agreed. “I think this is someone else.”

“It looks a bit like a generated building,” Jack said. “I’ve heard about the tech.”

“Likely it,” the Doctor said.
“Generated building?” Rose asked.

“Created using molecular rearrangement,” the Doctor explained. “Imagine 3D printing times a million and you’ll get close. You can make buildings in an instant, but you need a lot of energy…. The Doctor paused and glanced around. “Which you could manage in a vibrant forest, but it would impact some of the trees.”

“Bu pulling energy out of them?” Rose asked. She was stunned. That sounded more like magic than science, but they were a billion years in the future. “Is that what you’re saying?”

“Yep.” The Doctor’s answer was short and Rose let it drop. There were more important issues to be concerned with.

“It’s just hard to believe that this is here,” Rose admitted. “We’re not that far from the city.”

“We’re in a ravine which doesn’t help and I doubt they keep everything monitored,” the Doctor said.

“But we’re so far in the future.”

“Technology comes and goes as civilization changes,” the Doctor said. “And the Trees of Cheem don’t put as much focus on technology as other cultures. This is the Forest, it’s meant to be a bit wilder and grow free. Honestly, it’s impressive that they even caught on to the fact that something was young.”

“Good thing they did,” Jack said. “Given that they are plant lifeforms themselves.”

“Do you think making the building is the only problem?” Rose asked.

“Not sure,” the Doctor said. “If it was just this one building then the problems would have stopped. It wouldn’t be spreading.”

“So whoever made this is still working on something or there is something else,” Jack summarized. “Sounds like we need to take a closer look.”
Rose and the Doctor agreed, but there was no good approach. There was an open radius around the building that was free of trees and any vegetation that could offer cover. If that was by design as a defensive measure or sheer coincidence after building the structure, Rose wasn’t sure. She had no idea what to look for when it came to weapons. There were no visible holes where a weapon could be deployed and she realized a moment later that there weren’t even any windows. The closest comparison was that it was a large shipping container and that didn’t make her feel any better.

The Doctor didn’t seem that worried. He walked right up to the doorway, slipping away from Rose and the Jack as they tried to stop him. Rose wasn’t military, but some of the habits UNIT had taught her held on. She hissed at the Doctor, but he calmly knocked on the doorway. Rose and Jack shared another look, but then followed the Doctor up to the door.

“He’s lucky we like him,” Jack grumbled.

Nothing happened. The Doctor dropped his hand to the small panel beside the door. Rose expected him to pull out the sonic screwdriver, but instead, he simply pressed one large rectangular button at the bottom of the panel.

“They didn’t lock it,” the Doctor said pleasantly.

The door slid open, making no sound and Rose tensed, her senses on high as she tried to be ready for anything. Before them was a short lit corridor with five doors, two on each side and one at the far end. There were no windows and panels in the ceiling lit the way. No decorations hung on the walls and there were no personal effects that hinted as to who had built this place.

“I don’t like this,” Jack murmured.

“We’ll take a quick look and see what we can find,” the Doctor said. “If we don’t answer any questions, we’ll get the samples and let Jabe know this is here.”

“Let’s hope they’re gone,” Rose said. She had a hopeful thought that someone had come to the planet, built this place before realizing that the world was already colonized and then left. But someone with this kind of tech would surely know that people lived here.

They stood in the corridor for a few long moments, waiting to see if anything happened. But there were no alarms and no one came looking for them. Jack and Rose shared a worried glance and she
saw Jack adjust his stance. He was ready to fight if need be. Then the Doctor went to the first door on the right and pushed it open slowly.

Inside was a sterile-looking white room with several large pieces of equipment that were too alien for Rose to identify. The Doctor strode across the room and began to examine one. There were shelves with samples fixed to the wall and a small closed-off area made of clear glass with gloves fixed inside of it. That Rose recognized as a way of working with dangerous samples.

“I don’t like the look of this,” Jack said. “Could it be some kind of weapon that is being created, someone looking to kill off the forest? Maybe so they can mine or some other sort of profit?”

“The Forest of Cheem was established on a post-industrial mining world,” the Doctor said. “The planet was stripped almost a million years ago. The Trees brought it back to life when they made it a colony world so there’s nothing left to mine in the ground.”

“Then what’s with the mad scientist lab?” Jack was leaning towards the samples, frowning at the labels thoughtfully. “There’s got to be a connection between this place and what’s happening to the trees.”

“Likely, but we don’t know what that connection is yet Jack,” the Doctor said.

“Is any of this something we can use?” Rose asked. “Nothing is familiar to me, but maybe some files would shed some light on this.”

“I don’t see anything that looks like a data recorder,” Jack agreed. He was frowning and began checking the tables for anything unusual. “No computer, no journal. Whoever is here much have it on them.”

“Not surprising,” the Doctor said. “They have equipment for chemical experimentation and even a genetic sequencer.”

“So they’re working on something big,” Rose said.

A snarl from the doorway made Rose jump. Spinning around on her heels, she found that they were not alone. The figure that strode forward through the doorway was shorter than them with thick fur covering most of its face. The nose protruded a little and had a soft moist tip rather like a
dog’s. Its general shape was humanoid, but it was short and stout with only three fingers and a thumb. Dressed in a simple tunic and pair of pants, it didn’t seem threatening, but the expression on its face was thunderous.

“What?” It looked between them in shock. “What are you doing here?”

“We’re investigating the area. Something is harming local trees,” the Doctor explained. His jaw was tight. “We came to collect samples, but found a lab instead.”

“Trees? Oh yes, I’ve been using them as subjects,” the alien said. It seemed to recover its poise and glared large brown eyes at them. “This isn’t any of your concern. You shouldn’t have come into my lab.”

“We were asked by the locals to take a look,” the Doctor snapped.

“Locals?”

“There’s a city not far from here,” Rose pointed out. She was watching the alien carefully. “How could you miss it?”

“I did scan for life,” the alien answered. There was a tone in its voice that Rose didn’t like.

“The Trees of Cheem register as plantlife to most scans.” The Doctor was frowning deeply. “So you set down without realizing that you were endangering others.”

The alien paused and seemed to struggle for a moment. Rose held her breath, waiting for an apology, but instead the alien shook its head. Then it shrugged and headed for a cabinet.

“It doesn’t matter,” it said. “The experiments are almost done. I didn’t know they were there, but this place is perfect.”

“We just told you that you’re potentially endangering a city,” Jack said. His eyes were wide. “What could be so important that you don’t care?”
“I’m gathering information,” the alien snapped. They puffed up their chest, looking up at Jack and trying to make themselves larger. “My work is critical! I am Hibeurt Gampus! My work is known across the galaxy and you have no right to interfere.”

“Never heard you,” the Doctor said dismissively. “But what are your experiments for?”

“I don’t have time for these questions,” Gampus huffed. He pointed at the door. “Clearly I should be locking up. Out! Get out now!”

“Your equipment is impressive,” the Doctor said, ignoring the demands. “But that one,” the Doctor nodded to an odd-looking metal box that had buttons on one side and an odd screen on the other. It looked a bit like an old fashioned television to Rose, but there were also lots of strange wires. “That one is very interesting, never seen anything like it.”

“It’s my own invention,” Gampus said. There was a hint of pride and his earlier anger was fading. “A bit beyond you I’m afraid, but at least you know good workmanship when you see it.” Then he shook his head, seemingly to recenter himself. Glaring at the Doctor, he pointed towards the door. “Leave.”

“Whatever you’re doing poses a risk to the trees,” the Doctor said firmly.

“My work is more important,” Gampus hissed. “They can live with it.”

“What are you trying to do?” Jack asked. “Are you taking samples of the trees for terraforming because if you are, then I think you should talk with the trees. They terraformed this planet themselves.”

“Terraforming has nothing to do with it.”

Gampus eyed the three of them and suddenly lunged towards one of the cabinets. Jack grabbed him, trapping him in a headlock. Gampus lashed around, trying to free himself and Rose grimaced in sympathy. Something was clearly going on with this man, but she didn’t like having a confrontation like this. Jack made a soft shushing sound and a wild gleam appeared in Gampus’s eyes.
Then Hibeurt Gampus slumped to the floor with a groan. Jack gently lowered the man and moved him to the side of the room. The Doctor looked at Jack and nodded with something like approval much to Rose’s surprise. A shiver escaped her. It was a relief that the man was unconscious. Something in the way he’d been talking put her on edge.

“So are dealing with a mad scientist here?” Jack asked. “Just doing this for kicks?”

“I don’t know,” Rose said. “It could be.”

“Hibeurt Gampus,” the Doctor repeated. “Now that I think about it, that name is a bit familiar.”

“Good familiar or bad familiar?” Rose asked.

“I’m leaning towards bad familiar,” the Doctor said. He knelt beside Gampus and started digging around his pockets.

“He was avoiding telling us what he was working on,” Jack said. “If he was only studying the trees that would be something, but he’s definitely impacted them.”

“So should we take him to the city?” Rose suggested. “They must have a legal system. I’m sure he’s violated at least one law.”

“More than one,” the Doctor said. “In this era, there are a lot of regulations about establishing yourself on planets. Most of them are already owned.” The Doctor pulled what looked like a small notebook from Gampus’s pocket. It was an old fashioned item that startled Rose with even existing in this time period. “And he’s got to know that. A lush planet like this….” The Doctor shook his head and began flipping through the notebook. “That’s interesting.”

“What is?”

“Some sort of formula and a lot of notes. It’s incomplete, whatever it is.” The Doctor stood up and pocketed the notebook, staring down at Gampus. “He’s definitely working on something.”

“And not having any regard for the locals,” Jack said.
“I don’t know,” Rose said. She shook her head. “Let’s check the other rooms before we assume too much.”

Jack nodded. “Right, you stay here,” he said and before Rose could argue, he slipped through the door.

The Doctor chuckled and Rose shot him a glare before she followed Jack. When she’d brought him onboard, she hadn’t considered the possibility of him already falling into the overprotective big brother pattern. Especially not since he’d been digging into her romantic life just that morning.

Moving back into the corridor, Rose once again searched for any signs of cameras or security. Nothing stood out. Jack listened at the door across from them for a moment before easing it open. The room was dark, but lights flashed to life as soon as they stepped inside. It was a room roughly the same size as the first, but rather than lab equipment there were three large tubes that clearly opened set up in the room on heavy metal tables.

The capsules were roughly six feet long and domed. Rose had a bad feeling that she knew what they were as they walked over. All three were hooked up to tubes and machines that were monitoring them. Jack stopped beside her and visibly winced.

“I’m going to hope that these aren’t what I think they are.”

“They’re stasis pods,” the Doctor said. He slipped between them, pushing Jack a little. “The questions are: is there someone in them and are they there willingly.”

The Doctor glanced their way and Rose forced herself to relax. This day just kept getting worse and worse. He stepped up next to the nearest pod and studied it for a moment. Without a word, the Doctor became to mess with a small series of controls on the side. Jack approached and Rose followed after a quick glance back into the hall to make sure they were alone.

The top of the pod shimmered and the outer layer that hid the inside slid back in a series of tiny folding prices. Rose didn’t even have the chance to appreciate the very futuristic technology because her eyes fell on the figure inside of the pod. It was just as she’d feared. The humanoid figure was vaguely female with soft features, but their skin was a deep strangely textured green color. They were dressed in a simple white medical gown and their eyes were closed in slumber. Rose noted that the inside of the pod had bright lights that were a bit like glow lamps. She and Jack stayed back as the Doctor examined the figure through the glass.
“Plant based lifeform,” the Doctor announced. “But not a tree. She’s something else.” He spun to one of the monitors and began tapping different parts of it to bring up new charts and images. “And she’s ill.”

“Okay, okay, then maybe the mad scientist back there is trying to help them,” Jack said.

The Doctor said nothing. He moved to the next pod and retracted the screen. There was another planetoid figure slumbering inside. This one seemed roughly the same age as the first. The third had a small and slighter figure that Rose gasped at the sight of it. At best, it was a teenager.

“Doctor?” Jack pressed. “Do we wake them up?”

“I have no idea what species this is,” the Doctor said. He shook his head and kept flipping through the monitor’s information. “I don’t know if he’s helping or hurting them. And I don’t know if it’s safe to wake them up.”

“Are they stable?” Jack asked. He leaned over to examine one. “And how can you not know what they are?”

“I don’t know everything, Jack,” the Doctor snapped. He stopped flipping through the screens and then dug out the journal. “I think-” The Doctor cut himself off and Rose slipped up beside him to look at the notes. “They’re the experiment. This is some kind of formula…” The Doctor looked down into the pod again. “I’ve seen something like them before. They weren’t this humanoid, but-”

“Those giant plants things?” Rose asked. “Mel told me about them. Weren’t they made as slaves?”

“They were.”

The Doctor did something else with the screen, changing it to an image of body heat and a strange internal organ set up. His eyes grew cold and he looked over at Jack. “Go and tie up Gampus. That name is becoming more familiar now.”

“Bad familiar?” Rose guessed.
“Bad familiar. I think these people are weapons. Something is growing inside of them and it isn’t good.”
It wasn’t often that the Doctor didn’t know something. It happened on occasion. That was after all why he traveled the universe, but between his years at the Academy on Gallifrey and centuries of travel, he’d come across almost everything at least once. Rose looked down at the face of the sleeping creature and sighed softly in sympathy. A lot of horrible possibilities were going through her head and she could only hope that they were wrong.

“We should get Gumpas back to the city,” Rose suggested. “They can keep him locked up and might be able to track down some information about him that could help.” She eyed the unconscious alien. “And I hate to say it, but there easily could be a harmless explanation for this. Maybe he made them and something went wrong and he’s trying to help them.” Given how he’d spoken earlier, Rose doubted it, but people weren’t always calm and articulate when they were stressed. “Just to be safe.”

“I need to stay here with the pods,” the Doctor said without turning around. “Whatever is happening here is happening fast. If they are a lab-created species then it’ll be hard to tell what kind of life cycle we’re dealing with and what is going on inside of them.”

“I’m with Rose, let’s hope it’s an instability that he was trying to fix,” Jack said darkly. “But I agree with her that we should take him to the city.”

“Rose, go and get some samples for Jabe,” the Doctor said. “Then you and Jack can take Grumpas back to the city.”

“You sure?” Rose frowned. “I don’t like leaving you here alone.”
“Neither of you is transporting him alone,” the Doctor insisted. “That’s asking for trouble.”

Given that the hover cart was open-topped, the Doctor had a point. Rose nodded and headed for the doorway to collect the sample pack from the hover cart. Behind her, she was well aware that Jack was moving closer to the Doctor to talk and pushed down a wave of irritation that Jack was waiting until she left.

…………………………..

The Doctor kept his attention on the readouts. Something was very wrong here, but he couldn’t put his finger on it. If they were lucky, it was some kind of physical defect that would only affect these three beings as tragic as that option was, but there was the real possibility that they were incubating some kind of terrible disease that would affect plant life. There was a whole spectrum of things it could be and he didn’t know enough. Jack stepped up next to him, distracting him from his thoughts.

“I know you aren’t sure about me,” Jack said. “But I swear to you, that I will keep Rose safe.”

The Doctor met Jack’s eyes. The lad’s gaze was firm and he was reminded that this wasn’t some useless pretty boy. Jack had seen more than most and lived through more than most ever should. Some of his initial distrust still nagged at him. Jack Harkness was not this man’s real name, the Doctor was sure of that, but Rose’s affection for him and his actions during the Blitz meant something. Besides, the Doctor knew he shouldn’t judge people by them not using their real names given his own situation.

Jack’s words about not knowing what he’d done in those years rang in the Doctor’s head. Jack wanted, needed to be trusted, by someone else. He needed the Doctor to believe that he could and would protect someone. Rose had said it, sometimes you needed someone else to believe in you before you could believe in yourself. That had been him after the War and now it was Jack.

Grabbing Jack’s wrist, the Doctor began to input coordinates in the Vortex Manipulator before Jack could protest. “I’m saving the coordinates for Rose’s home period,” the Doctor said. “If something goes wrong. If you can’t get back to the TARDIS then get her home. She won’t thank you for it, but she’ll be safe.”

“Yes, sir.” Thankfully Jack did not salute.
“And here.” The Doctor dug into his pocket and searched until his fingers wrapped around a small yale key. Drawing it out, the Doctor held it up for Jack to see and watched the younger man swallow. “TARDIS key, about time you had one.” He held it out and almost smiled when Jack reverently opened his hand, letting the Doctor place the key in his palm. “And I know you’ll keep her safe. You kept Jo safe.”

Jack nodded and closed his fist around the key. He nodded to the Doctor and looked like he was going to say something, but the usual boisterous man was at a loss. Smiling slightly, the Doctor nodded at the door behind Jack.

“Don’t wait too long. You’ve been with us long enough to know how she can wander off.”

That got a smile from Jack. The former Time Agent winked at the Doctor. “We’ll check out the local scene, Doc. Maybe find some trouble.”

“She always finds trouble,” the Doctor grumbled.

Still, he felt a bit better when Jack hurried after Rose. She was good at getting out of trouble, but he had to admit that he was liking having someone else to help keep an eye on her. There’d been too many close calls over the years and those were just the events that he knew about. The Doctor frowned and pushed that train of thought away. It would do no good to dwell on Rose’s complicated timeline and what might or might not have happened in her past.

He moved to the next pod instead and studied the readings. It was nearly identical, a failure of the internal organs and nervous system, but he couldn’t determine the cause. Jack came in a few minutes later as he grabbed some of the stored samples and tied up Gumpas as the alien groaned softly in his sleep. If the Doctor enjoyed watching Gumpas be dragged out of the room in the corner of his eye, he didn’t think too much about that.

……………………

Jack had a skip in his step as he exited the complex despite dragging their prisoner. Rose paused in her scraping of tree bark to watch him secure the tied up Gumpas in the back of the hover cart. She didn’t dare risk trying to talk right now. The kit had come with a strange bubble-like face mask that Jack had insisted she put on. It fit tightly over her mouth and nose and had a strange texture a bit like the slime they sold in small containers in corner markets as a kid’s toy. She shivered at a couple of unpleasant memories of that stuff and babysitting.
Her hands were gloved in protective material that shimmered softly in the sun and weighed nothing. It was all very familiar and strange at the same time. A strip of bark gave way and Rose quickly put it into a small glass-like container. She sealed the lid and bent down to put the container in the bag. There were only two sample jars left and Rose cast her eyes around for anything else of value.

“Rose?” Jack called.

“Almost done,” she answered. It was strange to hear her voice so clearly through the mask and the texture was even stranger against her moving lips. “We’ve got some fern leaves, soil samples, what looks like healthy bark and sick bark, any other suggestions?”

Jack frowned and glanced at the building. “I’d say samples from inside, but I doubt we can risk opening the pods just yet.”

Rose hated that. She wanted to open the pods and talk to the people inside, but until they knew more, she knew it wasn’t safe. Jack jumped down from the back and headed for the door. “I’ll see about getting a copy of the digital files. We should give Jabe something about the building.”

Nodding her understanding, Rose grabbed the sample kit and walked over to a nearby tree that seemed to have been infected. The bark was shivering up and cracking with strange ugly grey patches discoloring the leaves and layer under the dissolving bark. Using the kit, she cut into the damaged layer under the bark, wishing she knew more about plants and trying to remember what it was called. Problem was, she wasn’t sure if she’d ever learned that in biology.

Once she had the last samples, Rose climbed into the hover cart and took the wheel with a mixture of excitement and dread. Most of the controls were similar to what she was used to and the rest were very intuitive. She supposed that with the humanoid shape being so common, there were a limited number of ways to design certain things. After all, humans all across the globe had figured out swords and tools independent of each other.

“Let’s go,” Jack said once he was in place.

Rose couldn’t help but hesitate. The seat next to her was empty and it shouldn’t be. She looked over at the building.

“He’ll be fine,” Jack said.
But Rose couldn’t help but remember Mel’s story about the last time someone had created plants. They’d been made as slaves and went on a killing spree to avenge themselves. It hadn’t been a story with a happy ending. It had been one of those days where a companion was just grateful to be alive. Shivering, Rose turned her attention to the controls. The sooner they handed Gumpas over and established communication with the odd bunker, the happier she’d be.

“He’s got a phone now,” Jack reminded her.

“If he uses it,” Rose grumbled. Picking up a phone for Jack had been a nice little trip to her home time and she’d gotten one for the Doctor, but he was bad at ignoring it or leaving it off.

They couldn’t talk on the way to the city with Jack in the back and the wind. Rose took the chance to think, but she wasn’t sure what was happening. So far they’d been able to keep the danger low and she hoped that would continue to be the case. Her eyes checked the trees as they drove, searching for signs of the infection, but it wasn’t obvious.

When they reached the city, Rose had to use the navigator system to help them find their way to the proper building. They came to a stop and Rose turned into the seat to find Gumpas stirring and Jack watching him was a sharp and thoughtful look. Gone was a flirt and in its place was a concerned former Time Agent or, she supposed, companion of the Doctor.

“I’ll stay here,” Jack said. “You try to find Jabe.”

Nodding in agreement, Rose grabbed the sample bag and rushed to the back door. She found the doorbell and pushed it for a long moment before reminding herself that it wasn’t really a doorbell and leaning on it might not do anything. Jabe came walking into view a moment later, a picture of grace and restrained worry.

“Rose,” Jabe greeted as the door opened.

“We have the samples,” Rose said. “But we found a lab set up in the ravine.”

“A lab?” Jabe’s shock was obvious. “How? Why?”
“Not sure how you didn’t detect it,” Rose admitted. That did surprise her. “And we’re working on why. There was a scientist there and he’s got three uh plant people in pods. The Doctor didn’t know the species.”

“He didn’t know, but he’s a-”

“Yeah,” Rose sighed. Her shoulders slumped a little. “We’re not sure what to make of things and the scientist was… well, he seemed crazy.” Rose gestured over her shoulder. “The Doctor stayed there to try and figure out what is going on, but we brought the scientist here. He said his name is Gumpas.”

“Gumpas,” Jabe repeated. Then she shook her head and walked closer to the hover cart. “I do not know that name. You don’t know what he was working on?”

“We aren’t sure,” Jack admitted. “The Doctor’s trying to figure it out. Current theory is he created those people for something, but they’re unstable. He was testing stuff on the trees, probably to fix them.”

“He was very dismissive that there was a city here,” Rose said. She shook her head. “Can you hold him? Maybe try to find out about him?”

“Of course.” Jabe nodded and pulled a small device from a pocket of her coat. It was very similar to what Rose had seen her use on platform One. “Rose, will you take the samples inside. I’ll alert security and begin an identification search.”

That sounded good to Rose, but it didn’t shake her nervousness. Grabbing the sample bag, she headed to the front door and pulled out her phone. She kept it tight in her hand as the disinfection process started all over again. Hair stuck to her face and Rose held back a sigh, unwilling to open her mouth as the air blasted her dry.

“I hate that stuff,” Rose grumbled when the inner doors finally opened.

Another tree was waiting for her inside. He was much taller than Jabe and his eyes locked on the sample bag. With a rushed thank you, he swept the bag out of her hands and walked quickly towards the back. Rose blinked after him, but let it go quickly. Instead, she focused on her phone and quickly found the new speed dial for the Doctor. Turning around, she brought the phone to her ear and watched the proceedings outside as she waited for the Doctor to answer.
Jack couldn’t shake the bad feeling crawling up his spine as the security detail approached. After seeing the city empty, it was shockingly strange to suddenly see a team of six trees closing in on them. Jabe was close beside him and while Jack would have normally focused on flirting, he was instead watching the prisoner closely.

“Be sure you search him,” Jack said. “I’ve checked him over, but I could have missed something.”

“But be gentle,” Jabe added. “We don’t know for sure yet what he is up to. He might be innocent of any intentional wrongdoing.”

“I doubt it,” Jack muttered. “You didn’t see this guy at the lab.”

“I don’t wish to make things worse,” Jabe countered. Jack nodded, he had to respect how calm she was being about all of this. “Will you and Rose return to the lab?”

“I think so,” Jack said. A soft sigh escaped him. “I don’t like leaving him there alone, but none of you should go until we know more.”

“You’re very worried.”

“You ever hear the story of the Trojan Horse?”

“No.” Jabe blinked at him. “Is it important?”

“I hope not.”

He didn’t have time to explain any further. Rose came burst out of the main building, her face flushed with worry and her eyes wide. Jack was instantly on alert and heading towards her. Jabe asked what was wrong, but Rose’s eyes were on him when she answered.
“The Doctor says that the subjects just woke up.”

“And?”

“And it’s a weaponized disease,” Rose said. “He’s sure of it. They’re incubating some kind of plant killer.”

Jabe’s horrified gasp was enough to send them into action. Without discussing it, Jack jumped into the hover cart, taking the wheel this time and Rose climbed into the passenger seat. Jack had just enough presence of mind to toss Jabe his mobile phone so they could contact her before they sped off towards the lab and the Doctor. He also had enough awareness to realize that the Doctor was not going to be happy that he was bringing Rose back with him.
Plant zombies. There were no other words for what Rose and Jack found when they returned. The three plant figures had gotten loose and were stumbling around the area surrounding the lab as if they weren’t sure how to walk. They were touching any plants they could find while the Doctor tried to scan them with the sonic screwdriver. Worse was the way that the plants were withering under their touch.

As the hover cart lowered, Rose could only stare in stunned silence. She supposed that this was one way to spread a biological weapon, but not the most efficient way. Except maybe this wasn’t the intended way.

“Give me a hand!” the Doctor snapped. He glanced at the sonic screwdriver. “They aren’t dangerous to us, just to plant life.”

Jack jumped into action while Rose’s brain was still trying to catch up. She could damn near hear Mickey howling with laughter over plant zombies. Prying her hands off the seat, Rose jumped down and summoned her sword. Jack was trying to herd one back into the building without touching it which wasn’t going well. It stumbled forward, dragging its feet through withering ferns and vines, reaching for another tree. Rose approached and brought up her sword.

“Wait!” the Doctor’s voice cut through her thoughts. “I’ve detected higher brain activity.”

“Are you saying they are alive?” Jack asked. He was reaching for one of the plant creatures only
for it to flinch back. Jack froze in place. “Uh… I think that may be right.”

Rose released her sword, letting it return to bracelet form. The plant creature in front of her was watching her. There was no recognition that it was in danger in those bright green eyes. It didn’t seem to understand. Like a child, Rose’s mind offered and she lowered her hands.

“Can we touch them?” Jack called to the Doctor. “We’re mammals so we can touch them, right?”

“I’m trying to finish a scan-” the Doctor was looking at the sonic screwdriver. His shoulders tensed and then relaxed. “Yeah, we can touch them.”

“Then this just got easier!” Jack reached forward to grab one of them.

It whirled around and shoved him. Jack was thrown off of his feet and crashed landed onto the ground several feet back. Rose’s eyes widened in alarm and she rushed forward. The plant creature ignored her and walked away, infecting more vegetation as it went.

“They’re strong,” Jack groaned. Rose helped him sit up slowly. “Very strong.”

“Plants are pretty strong,” Rose agreed softly. “I suppose it shouldn’t surprise us.”

“And yet, I was surprised,” Jack said. He carefully climbed to his feet, Rose beside him. “Doc, what’s the plan here?”

“We need to get them back into the containment pods!” The Doctor answered. He was trying to approach one of the plants, his hands where it could see them. “I was narrowing in on what was going on when they started waking up.”

Rose and Jack exchanged a look and then Rose glanced up at the sky. The sun hadn’t set yet, but they were creeping into late afternoon.

“Any idea what night will do to them?” Rose asked. “When the sun goes away?” she clarified.

The Doctor looked over at her and grinned, his eyes bright. “Not with certainty, but their pods had
lamps in them. Once they were out, they immediately came outside.”

“Maybe they detected the sun,” Jack said slowly. “And when that goes out of view…”

They were all sharing the same idea. It made Rose grin, but then she noted how one of the trees was groaning under its own weight. These things had done a lot of damage to the immediate area and they had to keep them contained. What else did plants need? How were they causing the wither effect?

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

“Wandering around,” the Doctor grumbled.

“No, to the plants,” Rose said. “Is it a fast-acting virus or something else?”

“No, it’s not a virus,” the Doctor answered. “They’re absorbing nutrients at a hyper-accelerated rate. That growth in their chest wasn’t a virus or tumor, it was a specially designed organ. The plants are withering because they are losing all their nutrients at a rapid rate.”

“Are you sure it doesn’t affect mammals?” Jack demanded. “Cause that sounds like it could affect mammals.”

“It isn’t keyed to mammals,” the Doctor said, but there was a dark tone in his voice. “Not yet at least, which is why this needs to stop here.”

Jack grunted as he grabbed the plant. It released a strange high pitched sound that rolled down Rose’s spine as it cried. Around them, the trees seemed to shake and shudder in response. Her stomach dropped. She really hoped that wasn’t a bad sign. The plant had come alive in Jacks’ grasp, twisting and trying to break free rather than its slow stumbling movement. The other two plants had bolted at the sudden display.

Rose and the Doctor rushed one of them. It froze in shock, staring at them and not moving. She tackled the plant creature. A shiver passed through her skin and Rose really hoped that she was imagining it. The plant thrashed beneath her and Rose desperately made soft shushing sounds, hoping to calm it. Fern leaves tickled her cheek but quickly turned into a scratching sensation as the leaves died.
Primal panic set in. The urge to run away pounded at the back of Rose’s skull, but someone she kept a tight hold of the plant and dragged herself and it to its feet. The Doctor was getting the lab door open for Jack as he wrestled the one he’d taken down back inside. Rose carefully climbed to her feet, keeping a tight grip on the plant creature. It was strong, pulling against her and Rose struggled just to hold it in place.

“I’ll be right there, Rose,” Jack called. “Let me get this one inside.”

She nodded but didn’t look over towards Jack. Her skin prickled and that cold shudder returned. Rose trusted the Doctor, but she could have shown that she felt weaker. Still, she held on and closed her eyes so she didn’t have to watch the horrible way that the plants around her were falling apart into dust.

Jack returned after far too long. His hand on her shoulder reassured Rose and she started to relax. The plant zombie broke free, elbowing her in the gut, but Jack grabbed it with a strong grip. It shrieked again and Rose hissed at the sound.

“These things are strong,” Jack grunted. He wrestled it towards the lab door. “Come on, the Doctor’s got the other pod ready.”

Nodding weakly, Rose didn’t let down her guard. Any of these escaping into the wild was a horrible possibility. Her heart kept pounding even as the lab door opened and they crossed the threshold. She could hear banging in the other room and grimaced at the sound. The door slid shut behind them and she fought to pull out her sonic pen. With a flick of her wrist, Rose locked the door and finally released a breath.

“This wasn’t so bad,” Jack said. “I was expecting something a bit more difficult. Or the Doctor cornered by these things.”

A soft chuckle escaped Rose. Jack had a point. She’d expected and imagined much worse during their frantic ride here. Jack nodded towards the door to the room where they’d found the pods in the first place. Their prisoner slumped against Rose, releasing a long slow sound that shook Rose’s bones.

“I know,” Jack said. “Breaks my heart too.” He offered her a soft supportive look and Rose helped him guide the creature into the room.
The Doctor was moving around the room with a frantic energy that would have been more in line with his next incarnation. The captured creature was pounding on the surface frantically.

“No language skills,” the Doctor said. Anger filled his voice. “We can’t calm the poor things down.”

“Let’s get this one back into bed,” Rose suggested. She tried to keep her voice gentle, but it had no calming effect on the plant creature.

“Be gentle,” the Doctor said. “This isn’t their fault.”

“Have you figured out anything?” Jack asked. They steered the plant creature towards the pod. It went slack in Jack’s arms and he hoisted it up into the pod before it could change its mind. Hands reached up and fearful eyes met Rose’s. “Doctor?”

“They are artificial,’ the Doctor said. The lid of the pod slid into place and Rose swallowed. “They’re an incubator and dispersal system for a biological weapon.” The Doctor turned back to a screen. “I’ve locked the pods,” the Doctor said. “Didn’t think of it before. Their vitals suddenly jumped.” He was eying the nearest pod as the plant creature tried to push open the lid. “We’ll have to keep an eye on them.”

“We need to catch the third one,” Jack reminded them. He moved back towards the door and Rose and the Doctor followed.

Stepping outside, Rose searched the foliage hopefully, but her heart quickly sank. She couldn’t see the third one and panic clawed at her chest. A string of alien curses escaped the Doctor as he pulled out the sonic screwdriver. They all waited with bated breath and Rose took a tentative step away from the door.

“It’s running,” the Doctor said darkly. “Towards the city. Rose, you and Jack track it and bring it back here.”

“What about you?” Rose asked Jack was already running for the hover cart.
“I’ll work on a way to deactivate their weapon system,” the Doctor replied. “Remember, it can’t hurt a mammal and it isn’t spreading germs or a virus. As long as you get it before it gets to the trees, it’ll be fine.”

Rose had the sense that he was trying to reassure himself as well as her. Nodding, she dashed to the hover cart and cursed herself for not being able to deal with the other one without Jack. If she’d been a little stronger than Jack could have taken down the third.

“We’ll find it,” Jack promised.

The hover cart kicked into action and Jack turned them sharply towards the city. Pulling out her sonic pen, Rose tried to set it to scan for plant life, but it was an unfamiliar setting. She tried three times, but couldn’t manage it.

“I can’t get a lock!” Rose yelled.


They traveled at a low speed this time and Rose frantically searched the trees surrounding them. A path of decay marked the way that their wayward plant creature had gone, but in the lush forest, it was hard to differentiate the shades of green. Any sign of movement drew her attention, but the wind was stronger outside of the ravine. Rose was amazed that the creature had climbed out rather than keep following the low area. It would have made them much easier to catch, but maybe some instinct had told the creature that.

Pulling out her phone, Rose called Jack’s phone and nodded to him when he glanced her way. He seemed to understand what she was planning because he slowed them down a little more as they passed a tree with a darkened spot. The phone rang and rang and Rose wondered if Jabe had left it somewhere or couldn’t understand the technology.

“Hello?” Jabe was speaking loudly, but Rose smiled.

“Jabe, one of the creatures has escaped,” Rose said quickly. “We’re tracking it in the forest, but it is heading towards the city at the moment.”

“Oh no!”
“It isn’t spreading a disease,” Rose assured her. “But it does cause plants to wither so keep everyone in lockdown. It drains plants by touch.”

“Can you stop it?”

“Yes, they don’t affect mammals. The Doctor has the other two contained and is working on a way to stop their draining effect. You just need to be careful.”

“I’m sorry that we can’t help you.”

“Don’t worry about that right now. Just keep everyone inside and we’ll find it.”

“Hopefully it won’t go into the city,” Jack said as Rose ended the call. He was eying a withered tree and the area beyond, trying to find the right direction. “After all, those stone structures wouldn’t look friendly to it. Even with the plants inside the buildings.”

“Hopefully,” Rose agreed. She felt like she was going to sick. “This was not what I was expecting this morning when I wanted to see this planet.”

Jack laughed, the sound warm and reassuring. “It’s never what you expect.”

………………..

The Doctor was leaning against the lab table and glaring at the cabinets. They were full of chemicals and stored retro-viruses. All the information on the DNA of the plants was on the screen beside him. But he was missing something. The effect wasn’t tied to their DNA, they were stable as it was and had great potential. The issue was that an artificial organ had been added to their chests and it linked through their nervous system.

Like all plants, they took what they needed from the air and the soil around them, but at a much faster rate. That organ was what made them need so much more than normal, but he was at a loss for how to remove it. A retro-virus could stop the cells from fixing the organ as it was damaged and wore out but wasn’t an immediate solution. Surgery was the best option, but thanks to it being linked into their nervous system that was dangerous.
The two pods in the other room were silent when the Doctor stalked back to them. He peered into the pods to find the two plant creatures sleeping. It was another side effect of their rapid metabolisms. If they weren’t sapping plants then they were trying to conserve what energy they did have. A nasty weapon that had to keep destroying to stay alive and was fueled by the natural desire to live. It wasn’t the worst weapon he’d ever seen, but it was up there.

This wasn’t going to be a fast fix. That was impossible. He had a solution, but Jabe would need to agree to oversee it. Given the threat that these creatures represented to her and her people, he wouldn’t blame her if she refused. He hoped that she wouldn’t. But he wasn’t going to risk the TARDIS to these creatures or risk them escaping onto other worlds. Jabe was their only hope.

He returned to the cabinets and pulled down some nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium along with a few other things. Maybe some fertilizer would hold back their need to drain other plants for awhile. The Doctor smiled a little and reached for a container of caffeine. He’d keep them going in containment until Rose and Jack returned.

His phone rang and he grabbed for it, afraid that something had happened. Jacks’ name popped up. That wasn’t surprising, it was one of only two contacts that he had in the phone and he’d used a bit of jiggery-pokery to block calls that he didn’t want thanks to the TARDIS. The last thing the universe needed was him becoming frustrated by scam calls.

“What is it, Jack?” He put the phone against his shoulder and kept working.

“This is Jabe,” the familiar voice of the tree said. “Jack gave me his communication device. He and Rose just warned me about the escaped weapon.”

“Good, then you know.” The Doctor was relieved by that. It made everything easier.

“What can I do to help?”

“If you have a containment unit there where you can store it that would help,” the Doctor said. “That way Rose and Jack don’t have to wrestle it back here if it does get all the way to the city.”

“Understood. Can you tell me anything about what we are dealing with?”
“These creatures are basically the highest maintenance plants and invasive species you’ll ever see.” She didn’t even chuckle at the joke. “They rapidly absorb nutrients from other plants through physical contact. I can’t say for sure if they were meant as a weapon or simply a way of clearing land amounts of land very quickly and I can’t get a good reading on their metabolism to determine their life span.”

“I see.” He heard Jabe sigh over the phone and gave her a moment to process. “I’m not comfortable ordering them destroyed given the circumstances, but do you think they can be safely contained?”

“I think so.” The Doctor started to smile. “When we met, I thought you were just a diplomat or businesswoman, but you’re not, are you?”

“The Forest greatly values intelligence,” Jabe said drily. “I am an expert diplomat, but also a highly respected biologist for my people.”

“Jabe, I think you’re just the person I need to talk to.”

Keeping the phone ready, the Doctor returned to the pod screens and brought up the latest bio readings. Without waiting for Jabe to say anything, he started to relay the information to her, hoping that she’d have some new ideas to offer. If they were lucky, Rose and Jack would secure the last plant soon and they could sort this out without any more damage to the trees of the Cheem.
Nervous energy had a tight hold on Rose’s body as they followed the trail of withering plants. It was becoming more and more obvious and Rose was beginning to worry that the effect built on itself. Was the plant’s absorption becoming stronger the more energy and nutrients it took? Or was running exhausting the plant requiring it to take more? Given that they didn’t seem to ever been far from the lab, that might be possible as it unlikely had much cardio training.

“We’re close to the city,” Jack called over. “Team TARDIS luck is holding. It’s going into the city.”

“Jabe knows what’s going on now, she’ll have put out an alert.”

“Not that people were outside as it was.”

“No, we don’t’ have to worry about it stumbling into market day.”

Jack laughed at that, a real laugh and it helped Rose relax. It wouldn’t be too bad. Not compared to how it could have gone, but she was going to worry until they had the plant somewhere safe for everyone. Up ahead, she saw the tall greenhouse buildings and eyed the path of wilted plants and went right to the edge of the stone street. But it ended there.

Rose realized that they had lost their breadcrumbs and judging from the way that Jack cursed, he had too. The hovercar came to a stop and Rose leapt out, running to the side and peering around to try and find a trace of the plant. Pulling on the sonic pen, she tried briefly to isolate the life form’s
readings, but with nearly half a million trees close by, she quickly gave up.

“Rose!” Jack called.

She raced over to join him next to a planter. The plants were wilted and oddly that made her feel better. They ran together up the first wide street of the city, Rose completely lost in terms of where Jabe’s lab was. They paused to look down each street, searching for a green figure amongst the smooth stone and glass buildings.

“We need to split up!” Jack shouted.

“You don’t have your phone,” Rose called back. “I wouldn’t be able to reach you!”

He cursed and Rose saw him shake his head. He didn’t make any move to leave her side. Rose’s stomach tightened with worry. They found another planter at an intersection stopped to looked around desperately.

“There!” Jack pointed to something on the next street. As they drew closer, Rose saw that it was a flower box around what looked like some kind of café. It was as good a sign as any. Rose just hoped that they weren’t being led astray by neglectful gardening. “This way!”

Rose trusted Jack’s lead. He seemed to have better eyesight than her. Likely an effect of being a human from centuries into her future. It was nice to know that they’d improve rather than all go blind from using screens all the time like her Mum was certain. They spun around a corner only to find two figures down the street.

A small tree, a child, was standing near the plant creature and staring at it in fascination. Rose ran, her mind whirling as she saw the plant reaching towards the child. A curious expression was on its face, almost childlike in its quality. It wasn’t trying to harm, but if she couldn’t get there, it would be a tragedy.

Jack was faster. He pulled ahead of her and yelled loudly. The plant stopped and looked up at them in wide eyes. The child’s eyes widened in shocked surprise. The child screamed when Jack didn’t slow down. He swept the child up in his right arm and knocked the plant away with his left arm. A scream split the silence as the child howled in alarm.
But it hadn’t been touched. Rose skid to a halt in front of the plant as it retreated. Its limbs were tensed, ready to run. Panting for air, Rose kept her eyes on the plant, not even turning to check on Jack and the child. She caught her breath quickly and swallowed back her nervousness. She needed to stay calm.

“It’s okay,” Rose said softly. She smiled at the poor frightened creature and tried to keep her face calm. Gampus was a different species so she had no idea what kind of expressions the plant had learned to free. “We aren’t going to hurt you. I know you don’t mean to, but you’re hurting others.”

Thus far, her lessons in telepathy had all been about protecting her mind. The Doctor hadn’t taught her basics of communicating yet, but as the plant had no language, it was the only idea that Rose could think of. Smiling gently, she kept her hands where the plant could see them and took a slow breath.

She wasn’t sure how to do this, but Rose pushed a sense of calm and safety towards the plant. Thinking of the TARDIS library and how she felt there, Rose tried to share that sense of peace with the plant. It was hard. Her heart was racing. Nervous fear that something tragic was about to happen haunted her. Still, Rose clung to the memory of calm that the library provided and kept her focus on the plant.

There was no way for Rose to certain if she got through. She was too untrained for open communication which was the only way to be completely sure. The plant couldn’t respond to her mentally or verbally. It stared at her, tilting its head slightly as if curious which gave Rose a flicker of hope.

The plant stilled, it didn’t take off running when Rose took a slow step towards it. She glanced at Jack out of the corner of her eye and found him standing in front of the child tree protectively, but giving her space. Tree figures were appearing in windows in the nearby buildings and the nervousness returned.

The plant made a soft sound of alarm and Rose returned all her focus to it. Pushing more of her worry and care for the plant towards it, Rose could only hope that her compassion got through. Once again the plant fell silent and let Rose take another step forward. Lowering her hands a little, Rose extended them towards the plant.

Jack made a small sound of worry but thankfully didn’t try to intervene. Tension was thick in the air and Rose was certain that any loud noise would spook the plant. They couldn’t simply tackle it as they had no idea where they were. The plant didn’t flinch back. A soft sigh escaped it and the creature melted to the ground. Marion knelt beside it and the creature reached over, tugging on a strand of Rose’s blonde hair. A soft laugh escaped Jack, but Rose could hear him try to muffle it. Apparently, calming it down had worked.
“Sweetie, can you ask your mum or guardians to contact Jabe,” Rose asked. She had no clue if last names were a thing and tried desperately to remember Jabe’s introduction at Platform One. But there had been so many strange and unfamiliar species there that Rose had been excited to see. “Tell her where we are. We’ll wait here.”

“Hopefully,” Jack muttered. None the less, he put the confused child down. “It’s okay,” Jack said. “Now, where’s your home?”

“Upstairs,” the child answered in a soft melodic voice. They pointed to an upper floor on a nearby building.

“I’ve got this, Jack,” Rose said encouragingly. She wasn’t convinced that the small child wouldn’t forget to call Jabe. “Find out where we are and let Jabe know.” Rose didn’t move away from the plant and slowly pulled out of her phone.

The plant tensed when Jack approached, but a soft shushing sound helped settle it. The plant went back to playing with Rose’s hair and a soft chuckle escaped Jack. Everything went silent after Jack and the child left. Rose finally relaxed a little and even smiled as the plant began to massage her scald curiously. That odd tingle as before rolled across Rose’s skin. She wasn’t sure what to make of it.

Hopefully it was nothing back. Maybe just a reaction to the odd texture of the plant’s hands. It was a cross between a leaf and a vine with tiny odd filaments that were almost like hairs. Still, she didn’t feel sick or weak and playing with her hair was keeping the plant distracted and calm. Rose would just let the Doctor check her over later.

…………………………

Jabe arrived with three trees and a floating pod. All of them were in what looked like hazmat suits. She had to push calm at the plant creature again at the sight of them. It had become lethargic and barely reacted with Rose carefully pulled it to its feet. Jack made a joke about the thing being high behind her which Rose ignored. The biggest hurdle proved to be when the plant didn’t want to release Rose’s hair and Rose had to gently extract herself from its grip.

When the pod closed around the plant, everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Jabe pulled off her helmet and smiled at Rose. “The Doctor is on his way with the others. I sent another vehicle for him and those pods.”
“What’s your plan?” Jack asked.

“The Doctor and I have prepared a treatment for them,” Jabe said. “It will be slow, but we can keep them contained and healthy until their systems stabilize.”

“You’ll be careful with them, right?” Jack asked. “They could do a lot of damage to your city.”

“They’ll only stay here for the short term,” Jabe explained. “I’ve already sent agents to evaluate Gampus’ lab. We need to secure it anyway, but with some expansion, it would be a good place to keep them. If we add some security fencing around the ravine, it could make for a good environment as they adjust to real life.”

“Thank you, Jabe,” Rose said earnestly. “Really.”

“Of course, they are living things. Besides, if we figure out how to counter their ability successfully then we can be ready in case this mysterious buyer tries again.” Shaking her head, Jabe motioned everyone towards a large floating vehicle that was a bit like a massive flatbed truck. “Let’s get this off the street so the cleaners can start sweeping through.”

Rose didn’t correct Jabe that there was no virus to be worried about. After all the public fear, it would probably help reassure everyone to see these cleaners on the streets. Jack shrugged and held his arm out to Rose. She accepted it with a smile and climbed into the cabin of the truck-thing.

The city flashed past them and Rose enjoyed the view. It was a beautiful city and she was finally able to relax and take it in. Jabe was speaking with someone through a small pad in her hands and had given Jack his phone back. When they pulled up at the science building, Rose and Jack hung back while a horde of scientists in hazmat suits descended. The Doctor was standing near the door, talking with a tree who looked exhausted at the effort of keeping up with the Doctor.

Rose held her breath, watching the pods as they were carefully carried into the building and bracing herself for something to go wrong. But the hover sleds stayed steady and the trees all kept a safe distance. Nothing tipped over and the remaining two plants didn’t wake up. Whatever the Doctor had given them was keeping them calm and unconscious.

“We’ll watch over them,” Jabe promised. “Arrangements have been made to transport Gampus back to prison.” Her tone was sharp with satisfaction and Rose was grateful that she’d never made Jabe mad.
“Back to prison?” Jack asked. “You were able to track him down after all?”

“Yes, he creates biological weapons to order.” Jabe shook her head. “I’ve sent messages to every other plant-based lifeform in the galaxy to warn them that someone was trying to buy a weapon that would be devastating against us, but Gampus insists that he didn’t know who the buyer was. We can’t even be certain that it was intended for use against us. It might have simply been designed to deforest planets for mining.” The words were bitter, but Rose had to admit that Jabe had a point.

“Very cloak and dagger,” Rose grumbled. “But at least it didn’t get far.”

“No,” Jabe agreed. She exhaled. “I’m not sure if we were lucky or not that he mistook Cheem for an uninhabited planet. While we’ll have to be watchful for a time, at least he was caught quickly.”

“Yes,” the Doctor said. “I’ve stabilised their systems a little. They won’t have the hyper absorption anymore so you’ll need to watch their needs carefully for a bit until the surgeries are complete. I’m sorry that you lost some of the forest, but the new growth will be healthy. I promise. There’s nothing wrong with it.”

Jabe smiled a little and nodded. Then her eyes went back to the green figures in the lower room. One of the trees was inside with a datapad and showing them something. They were staring at it like eager little children and Rose found herself relaxing. Jabe’s smiled softened, almost to one of affection and Rose smiled. At least these poor creatures were in good hands now.

The Doctor caught sight of them, a grin lighting up his face. Rose rushed over to him, hugging him tightly and sinking into the warm embrace he offered. Jack joined them a moment later, throwing his arms around them both. A giggle escaped Rose, but she didn’t complain. Not one little bit.


Jack pouted as he did so and the Doctor’s lips quirked as he failed to suppress his smile. He took Rose’s hand and squeezed, bringing her a little closer to him. The last of the tension finally drained out of Rose as the doors of the science building sealed behind the final pod.

“I didn’t ask earlier, but how did you calm it down, Rose?” Jack asked.
“I tried projecting my desire to help,” Rose answered.

The Doctor frowned a little as she expected. “You used telepathy?”

“A little,” Rose admitted. “No words or anything that complex, just that I wasn’t going to hurt it.”

“That’s a lot for an early 21st-century human,” Jack said. He was looking a little worried.

“I’m weird,” Rose shrugged. “It worked and I don’t have a headache or anything.”

“You’re getting stronger then,” the Doctor remarked. “We’ll do another lesson tomorrow to check your progress.”


“Uh, quick thing,” Jack said. “Do either of you remember where we parked.”

As one, Rose and the Doctor turned and pointed towards the direction of the setting sun. “That way.” Jack laughed when they shared a surprised look and the Doctor grinned. All in all, it had been a pretty good day in Rose’s opinion.

………..Coming soon: Sugar Plum Nightmare for Christmas……

Keep your eyes open for the first chapter of the Christmas special as a stand alone story.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!