The Past of the Doctor

by YouCleverBoys

Summary

History can be rewritten - even the Doctor's. About to leave the National Gallery after the events of "The Day of the Doctor", the Eleventh Doctor and Clara are handed yet another letter from Queen Elizabeth I. Earlier that day, she had wanted the Doctor's assistance, but now she's looking for revenge. What will the Doctor and Clara find when they, along with an old friend or two, travel back to Elizabethan England?

Notes

This is my first story ever, so I'd love to hear what you guys think. I want to send a big big hug and a million thanks to my dear beta - and most importantly, my dear friend - NoPondInTheForest for her support & encouragement!
A New Letter

National Gallery, London, 23rd November 2013

If ever there was a day on which the pain and sorrow of his many centuries of existence had meant nothing to him at all, or a day on which everything he had been deprived of and how much he had drooped became a hazy dream, a mirage, unreal and unimportant, it was certainly this.

Gallifrey falls no more.

Those words had been heavenly music to his yearning ears, and they had kept echoing in his head from the moment they came out of the curator’s mouth.

Home. He still had a home. Even if it would be utterly impossible for him to ever find it, the single knowledge of its existence and the certainty of its salvation had him dancing inside. Gallifrey was still out there somewhere, all thanks to him.

All thanks to them.

His sparkling eyes saddened at the thought of the tremendous joy Number Ten and Captain Grumpy would have felt had they also had the chance to hear those very words, even if they were hopelessly destined to forget them shortly afterwards. Seeing the surprised looks on his previous selves’ faces would have been like seeing the surprised reflection of his own.

The only person he could presently share that knowledge with was Clara – his gentle, marvellous Clara, once a mystery to be solved, now as transparent and beautiful as he had so badly hoped her to be. As he had always known, deep down inside, that she would turn out to be.

“Clara!” his brain screamed. Oh, he wanted so much to tell her! He needed so much to tell her!

And if he had not been so immersed in his own thoughts, he wouldn’t have completely forgotten that she was still waiting for him inside the TARDIS.

“Clara!” This time he didn’t even notice when her name escaped his lips.

“You okay now?” Clara asked in return. She had left the door ajar and had been peering through it for a few minutes by then, attentively observing him and enjoying the delighted look on his face with a broad smile on her own. It was easy to realise that something really good must have happened, but she didn’t feel she had any right to get in the way of a single one of his happy thoughts.

The Doctor jumped from his seat and turned left to the place where the TARDIS had been parked all along. Then he ran to her, beaming.

“Clara, we made it!”

“What?” she asked.

“Gallifrey! We’ve saved Gallifrey!”

Struck with amazement, Clara could hardly speak.

“But how do you know? Are you sure?”
Absolutely sure! The curator was just here and he told me that the wh…”

“Doctor, listen!” Clara interrupted, turning her head slightly to her left and putting her index finger on the Doctor’s pursed lips, something which, judging by the look on his face, he had clearly not been expecting.

With the room now being in absolute silence, it was easy for both of them to hear the quick steps of someone that was getting closer. They could even hear that someone calling for the Doctor breathlessly before they actually entered the room.

It was Kate Lethbridge-Stewart.

“She cried when she set her eyes on him, smiling, and gasping for air. “You’re still here! Thank goodness! I was worried you’d already left!”

“It’s practically a miracle that we haven’t. No worries! Doctor’s still here! Kate! What’s wrong? You look terrible!”

“Oh Doctor…” she went on, panting. “I’ve come running as fast as I could from the other side of the Gallery, and you know it’s huge!”

“Well, here I am now, you’ve found me! Now please, sit down, and when you can breathe normally again, please tell us what can possibly be so urgent”, the Doctor added, leading her to the nearest seat in the room and helping her sit down.

“Shall I get you a glass of water?” Clara asked.

“No, no, I’m fine, I just… I just need a moment.”

Kate’s hand reached for her jacket pocket, out of which she took an envelope. And a very old envelope indeed, the Doctor noticed, since he instantly recognized the wax seal.

For the second time that day, it was a letter from Queen Elizabeth I.

Ms Lethbridge-Stewart went on as she started to recover.

“The curator sent me here. He was afraid he wouldn’t make it in time. Someone’s just found this letter in the vault the other one came from, and he insisted it should be given to you immediately.”

She handed the envelope to the Doctor, who sat down next to her. Clara came closer and kneeled down next to the Doctor, who opened the envelope and unfolded the yellowish piece of paper that had remained inside for so many centuries. Then he proceeded to read it out loud.

17th May 1600

Doctor, You despicable man. Almost forty years have passed since you made a fool of me when you ran away after our wedding ceremony, never to come back again… Until last year! When I heard about certain events beyond belief that had taken place at The Globe and resolved to visit Master Shakespeare so that he could give me a detailed account of such events, who did I find there with him? I was stupid… I should have known! You, Doctor! Of all people!

After what you did to me, how dare you show your face in my kingdom again?

Since that day last year, Doctor, not a single minute has passed in which I haven’t sworn on the blood of my ancestors that, one day, I would eventually have my revenge, and by means of this
letter, my beloved husband, I am delighted to inform you that such day has come at last.

This message might never reach you, but I am afraid that the course of events shall not be altered in the slightest if it does not. My only present regret is the thought that, if it should, I shall not have the pleasure of beholding your countenance in learning that I am about to destroy what was once most cherished and precious to you.

I must go now. There is a fine young man waiting for me in St James’s Park! Sweet dreams, my Doctor. And don’t you ever dare come anywhere near my kingdom again, for if you do, know that I shall eventually have my dear husband’s stupid head inside a domed casing as part of the decoration in the banquet room.

Love,

Your Elizabeth.

Kate, Clara and the Doctor were stupefied, so much so that a few seconds passed before any of them could utter a single word. It was the Doctor who finally broke the silence.

“A fine young man? Ha! You wished!”

“Doctor, what is it? What is she talking about?”

“She’s trying to make me jealous! As if she could…”

“I don’t mean that! What is it that she’s stolen from you?”

“What? Oh! That! Well… I’m afraid I have absolutely no idea.”

“But you must! Think!”

“I don’t know, Clara…” he replied. “I honestly don’t know. I’m as dumbfounded as you are.” Leaving his previous remarks aside, his haunted gaze left no doubt that he really meant what he had just said.

“You don’t know? Okay then! So what are we waiting for? Let’s go!”

“Yes! Let’s go! Quick! We don’t have time to lose!” the Doctor repeated, jumping out of his chair before stopping dead. “Oh, wait a minute! Where are we supposed to be going?”

“Where do you think we’re going? What about May 1600?”

“Yes! May 1600! Of course! You’re right! You think I won’t show up, don’t you, my dear Lizzy? Come on, Clara! Let’s hurry!”

“Doctor…” Kate suddenly interrupted, forcing Clara and the Doctor to stop and turn back when they were already rushing inside the TARDIS. “Before you leave, it’s just an observation but… Considering the nature of the letter and who the lady involved is… I think it would be wise to turn to a certain gentleman for assistance.”

The Doctor remained silent for a few seconds, then he realised who Kate Stewart had meant with those words.

“Oh… Yes. Yes of course. You’re absolutely right.”

“It shouldn’t be too difficult to get to him, I reckon…”
“Oh no, of course it shouldn’t.”

“Doctor” interrupted Clara, suddenly struck by understanding, “wouldn’t it be wrong?”

“Absolutely wrong to be sure, but sometimes something wrong is the right thing to do.”

Clara looked at him silently for a moment.

“And how are we going to find him? Who knows where he might be right now…”

“Good luck, Doctor” Kate said, having recognised the resolve in the Doctor’s eyes. “And should UNIT’s aid be required, you know where to find us.”

“Thank you, Kate. I’ll see you again soon.”

The Doctor turned his back on her and took a few steps towards the TARDIS before he was abruptly stopped by Clara grabbing the crook of his arm.

“But Doctor! Are you really sure there any real chances that we might bump into him again?”

“Yes, of course I am” he answered, his eyes open wide – wider even than hers. “The truth is, Clara, I know exactly where to find him.”

Powell Estate, London, 1st January 2005

Aching all over, the Doctor finally dragged himself into the TARDIS.

He closed the door and leaned against it, eyes gazing down, before he raised his head and looked to the left. Taking hold of the handrail so as not to fall down, he headed in the direction of the console, then took off his long brown coat and threw it into the air.

Lifting his right hand, he could see the regeneration energy was starting to sparkle out of it. It was exactly the same thing that had happened the last time his body had undergone a full regeneration, when he had been looking at the console and suddenly realised his hand was shining brightly with a golden glow.

There was no going back now. He knew it was about to come.

Even in his present wretched state, he made an effort to walk around the console. He stopped in front of the computer screen just to say goodbye to his TARDIS while setting off to get as far away from Planet Earth as possible, and with the TARDIS already lost in the time vortex, the Doctor could still hear the chorus singing the melody the Oods had mentioned before he left the Earth. The whole universe would bide him farewell in unison, they had said.

It definitely was one of the most beautiful melodies he had ever heard.

He continued his walk around the console just to stop at the same place where he had been standing only a few seconds earlier. That music sounding in his head seemed now to be intertwining with a different melody, and one as sweet, but also much more powerful. What he couldn’t determine was whether it was actually easing his pain or piercing through his very soul. It was a sad song too, but at times he got the impression that it contained a message which his present
condition wouldn’t allow him to understand.

Or could it possibly be a message of hope?

Because he refused to believe that the last thing this version of him would ever do would just be go insane.

All of a sudden, the beating of his hearts made the pain in his chest unbearable. He looked around, on the verge of tears, and gasped in an attempt to hold them back, but he just couldn’t.

Crying and in terrible pain, the Tenth Doctor finally uttered the words that were meant to be his last.

“I don’t want to go!”

And then, instead of a whimper, there was a bang.

The regeneration energy emanated from his body, fierce as it had never been before, and it hit the console and the walls and the pillars, setting the TARDIS into fire.

That was when he heard the explosion.

The shake that followed was so violent that he fell on his back. As he raised his head, all the lights in the control room had gone out, and the choir and the music had abruptly come to a halt.

It was only when he got to his feet again that he realised the explosion and the blackout were not the only things he should be worried about – oddly enough, the fire had disappeared as if by magic, and to top it all up there was also the fact that he had not regenerated at all! And yet, there was no more regeneration energy coming out of his body, or accelerated heartbeats in his chest, or pain in any other part of his body. There was nothing, except a dark and non-active console room and a joyful remark coming from the door.

“Well, not exactly his best moment but… Did you hear that? That’s what I meant! I told you, didn’t I? I told you! I did! I did tell you! He always says that!”
Some liberties have been taken as far as Ten's memories are concerned. Big big thank you and hug to my dear beta NoPondInTheForest :-)
“What do you mean, what’s gone wrong? Nothing has gone wrong! Why should something have gone wrong? You look great!”

“Thanks, but to all intents and purposes, I haven’t regenerated. Has the process – I don’t know to put this – somehow changed? Is there a different protocol now? Am I supposed to shake your hand and wish you good luck? What will happen when I do? Will I just melt or disintegrate or something of that sort?”

“Of course not, Sandshoes! Why should those things happen? Regeneration is a process for which there never has been a… Oh, hang on. This is Clara by the way.” The Eleventh Doctor lowered his eyebrows before he went on. “You haven’t regenerated!”

“Hello Doctor. Nice to see you again. Oops!” the girl said before her smile vanished, immediately after which she covered her mouth with her right hand.

“Again?” the Tenth Doctor answered. “So I must assume we have met before, huh?”

“Oh, well done, you!” the Eleventh Doctor reproached her. Then he turned to the Tenth Doctor. “Yes, we have. And for us two, quite recently. Truth be told, you’ve practically just left. We were together at the National Gallery, just a few minutes ago. But who cares about that now? You haven’t regenerated!”

“No. I. Haven’t!”

“Then how can Clara and I be here?” the Eleventh Doctor added. “Why has your regeneration stopped? Why? Why? Why?!?” he added, looking away. “If we could have reached you at any point in time and space, why did it have to be during your regeneration?”

“Because you got the wrong coordinates,” interrupted Clara.

“Oh, yes! I got the wrong coordinates! Thank you very much, Clara! Mystery solved!” he said, his voice heavy with sarcasm.

“Oh, brilliant!” added the Tenth Doctor, whose voice was gradually starting to sound irritated. “You got the wrong date and have now created a paradox.”

“A paradox! Of course! What else could this be? Clara, we’ve created a paradox! It’s so exciting! I do love a good old paradox!” The Tenth Doctor and Clara kept looking at him in disbelief until his enthusiasm came to an end all of a sudden. “Now let me repeat my question. If you are not regenerating, and we all can see you are not, how can I be here?”

“My point exactly!” the Tenth Doctor scorned him.

“Are you two really being serious? ’Cause the answer’s quite clear to me,” Clara interrupted.

“What?” the two Doctors exclaimed as one, their eyes now fixed on her.

“Too many strange and unnatural things have been happening lately, and this might just be another, but I don’t think it is.”

“Then what do you think it is?” the Eleventh Doctor asked her.

Clara didn’t say a word. She kept looking at him while she took a few steps backwards before she turned around and walked towards the console of her Doctor’s own TARDIS. She let her hand pass along it for a few seconds when she reached it, then she turned around to face the Doctors and
“If you took a look around from where I’m standing right now, what would you see?”

“Us!” replied the Eleventh Doctor, pointing up his index finger with a ridiculous smile on his face.

“I asked what, not who!” replied Clara. “I mean, if you – the two of you – were actually standing here.”

“Oh, I see!” promptly replied the Tenth Doctor. His glasses had probably been inside one of the pockets of his suit all along, but judging by how expeditiously he took them out and put them on, he might as well have had them in his hand instead. He took one step forward and pushed Future Him aside with a swipe of his hand.

“Oh!” protested the Eleventh Doctor.

“A paradox! I knew it!” the Tenth Doctor went on. “And not just any paradox, but one created by the TARDIS herself.”

“Exactly!” Clara agreed, as the Tenth Doctor, who had just reached her, turned around and spent a few minutes studying the evidence that unquestionably supported her view.

“What?” asked the Eleventh Doctor, visibly annoyed.

“Would you care to look right behind you?” the Tenth Doctor replied.

“I don’t need to look around! I know what I’m going to see if I look around – your TARDIS. And why would I see it? Because when we decided to come looking for you, my TARDIS decided the best thing she could do was materialise around yours.”

“Yep! And in doing so, she’s created a paradox. My TARDIS shuts down and I don’t regenerate. I may have lost a memory or two, but we both can coexist.”

“But why would the TARDIS do that?”

“Excuse me?”

“This has happened before, Sandshoes, and there was no paradox and no shutting down. Nothing, except a temperamental red-haired Scotswoman flirting with herself.’

“What?”

“Honestly, can’t that wait?” interrupted Clara, and turning to the newcomer, she went on. “Doctor, we’ve come looking for you because something’s wrong and we need your help.”

The Eleventh Doctor nodded, realising she was absolutely right. He didn’t have a clue about what it might be, but it was obvious something very wrong would happen soon enough if they didn’t stop it first.

“Oh wow, well some things never change, do they?” the Tenth Doctor added, looking at Clara and smiling for the first time since that awkward encounter had taken place. “Alright then! I’ll be all ears – and keep my mouth shut, ...”

“I’d like to see that,” the Eleventh Doctor cut in.

“...though it would be really appreciated if you could make a few things clear before we do
whatever it is that we’re supposed to be doing. So far, I’ve learned that you’re the next Doctor – which is okay, I can live with that. However, you’ve created a paradox whose consequences we might deeply regret, and since this lovely young lady has just made it clear that you intentionally came looking for me… Well, let me tell you one thing – if the worst should come to the worst, it will all be your fault, you bow-tied, chinny thing. Oh, Clara!” he went on as he turned to her, grinning, and shook her hand. “It’s so nice to meet you, by the way! I think I owe you an apology if I sounded rude before. I can be quite rude sometimes in fact. Not that I meant to be rude to you at all. Believe me when I say it’s a real pleasure to meet you!”

“It’s okay, Doctor!” she replied in a tone which indicated that being patient was now absolutely out of the question. “And now, could you both just listen? You can discuss the mysterious ways of paradoxes later, but for the time being let’s do what we must, shall we?” she asked as her eyes turned to the Eleventh Doctor.

“As I was saying,” the Eleventh Doctor started, “we were at the National Gallery just a few minutes ago – a little bit longer for you I daresay, when this letter was given to us. I think you should read it.” He then handed the envelope in his hand to his previous self, who recognized the wax seal immediately.

“That’s from Queen Elizabeth I! Such a great woman! I love Queen Elizabeth I! Accidentally got engaged to her once. That was the last time I met her. The first time, she wanted to have my head cut off.”

“Yes, and we happen to know the reason why…”

“Oh, do you? Then you can fill me in! I never found out why. I always assumed it was just because she loved cutting people’s heads off. These Tudors – they’ve got a thing about beheadings! I’m rather surprised they were not the ones who invented the guillotine… What do you think they would have called it, by the way? The Tudorine? Well, never mind that… So, have you read it? What does it say?” the Tenth Doctor asked as he took the letter out of the envelope.

“Well, she’s basically quite upset by the fact that you ran away right after your wedding…”

“I’m sorry?” the Tenth Doctor added with a grimace.

“Your wedding,” replied Clara, marking her words. “Yours and the Queen’s. You married Queen Elizabeth I, have you forgotten that too?”

“I definitely have… Though it doesn’t sound like the kind of thing one would forget, does it?”

“Oh, interesting…” The Eleventh Doctor kept silent for a brief moment, then went on. “When I was you I remembered marrying her, but now that we have interfered… All your memories of what happened while we were with you have been wiped out. Wibbly-wobbly.”

“I’m still wondering who invented that.”

“So am I… But for the time being, what matters is this. You – we – married her, then we abandoned her, and now she’s seeking vengeance and that letter is a threat,” he added with resolution.

“A threat?” asked the Tenth Doctor, incredulous, the look in his eyes getting darker. “And what is she threatening to do?”

“That’s what we need to find out,” the Eleventh Doctor added. “She just says she’s about to destroy something that’s important to us.”
“The letter was written in May 1600,” said Clara, “so we thought the best thing to do is just go there and do some research.”

“I was there in 1599,” said the Tenth Doctor. “An old friend and I were saying goodbye to Shakespeare when she suddenly appeared. She made no threats. None whatsoever. Nor did I get the impression that she might have stolen something from me. She just wanted my head.”

“But there’s got to be something, Doctor,” Clara added, “since both your heads are still standing over your shoulders. There must be something else she’s got, something she’s found… I don’t know! What exactly were you doing there in 1599?”

“Long story… I’ll tell you while we’re on our way. Ok then! Off we pop, London 1600. Let’s see what this is all about. In the meanwhile, would you both please kindly tell me why I cannot remember becoming the King of England?”

*****

London, 16th May 1600, 11:58 pm

The TARDIS materialized somewhere very deep in the country during a very chilly evening, but despite the cold, Clara couldn’t fight the urge to run outside and breathe some fresh air. Regardless of the fact that she had already been travelling with the Doctor for quite a while and of how much of the universe she had seen in all that time, she felt a quiver of excitement running through her simply by looking up above – the view of the night sky was absolutely breathtaking! You could hardly ever see a sky like that in twenty-first century London, and you would positively not see it if you happened to spend most of your days and just about all of your nights in the city centre. But this was not central London, and it definitely wasn’t the twenty-first century. Never had the night skies of twenty-first century London been so dark, and yet so unmistakably bright. The millions and millions of stars that were shining in the blue were clear evidence of that.

While smiling at her enthusiasm, the Doctors’ eyes scanned their surroundings hurriedly. Their scanning was over the moment they spotted a nearby wood, at which point they looked at each other. As it happened, they had both unknowingly shared the same fear, and the realization of that made them share another smile – this time, one of complicity – and a nod. They had just found the way to put an end to their concern.

In turning to the TARDIS, Clara caught a glimpse of her Doctor walking towards the console, and another of the door getting closed behind the other Doctor’s back.

And then, out of the blue, the TARDIS dematerialised, leaving her alone in the dark.

*****

For the whole length of their journey to Elizabethan England, he had been listening attentively to the fascinating story his future self and his companion had been telling him. At times he had felt the events in their narration to be beyond possibility, but when their tale came to a fascinating end which implied that Gallifrey and every single Time Lord on it had lived happily ever after, he couldn’t think of a single reason why he should put the truthfulness of any of its details into question. Quite the contrary – he only wanted to know more.
The expression on his past self’s face had made the Eleventh Doctor feel so delighted and ecstatic that it became Clara’s task to add all the missing information the Tenth Doctor was so eagerly requesting. Looking at Number Ten’s face, he felt, was like looking at a child who had just been given his favourite toy for Christmas, one he had secretly been longing for but had never really expected to be given, maybe because it was unreasonably priced or because it had sold out so quickly that it was out of stock everywhere. He could understand the way he had to be feeling better than any one else in the universe, and he knew that finding that Christmas present right there in front of him, wrapped up in the most beautiful gift paper he could ever have imagined, had the potential to make that eternally sad man feel happy as a lark, in spite of the still bewildered look in his eyes.

“Thing is,” the Tenth Doctor started again, the two of them being now alone in the TARDIS after their brief landing, “although many of the things you’ve told me sound impossible – there’s no denying that –, all in all, we both know this is not the first time the course of the Time War has been altered. First Dalek Caan, then the Time Lords… They all broke the laws of time and succeeded, so why wouldn’t we?”

“We did, oh yes,” the Eleventh Doctor answered, face glowing. “But I’m nowhere near understanding much of it myself either, I assure you. Especially when it comes to explaining why or how we apparently happened to get a little help from a friend…”

“Getting help from all our previous selves? That makes perfect sense to me! They came, they helped, then they left. Eventually they all forgot, and I will also forget. And now that I’m thinking of it, I’ve just realised I’m the only one who will forget it all twice! How cool is that! Huh?”

“I wasn’t talking about them. It’s just something Grandad said.”

“Then spill the beans.”

The Eleventh Doctor knew the effect his words would have on the other Doctor, so he took a deep breath before going on.

“He mentioned a Bad Wolf girl.”

Nobody who had ever known him, if only just a little – or, on the contrary, only too well – would have imagined that, for once in his undeniably long existence, the Doctor, the Time Lord from Gallifrey, could actually be rendered speechless, least of all during his Tenth incarnation.

With his left arm over his chest, the thumb of his right hand under his chin and the forefinger of said hand on his lips, the Eleventh Doctor spent a few minutes pretending to be looking at some fascinating as well as imaginary data which wasn’t really appearing on the computer screen. What he really was doing was give the other Doctor – whom he would inconspicuously look at every now and then – time to react.

And as several minutes later the Tenth Doctor still had not reacted, Future Him decided to move on to the subject of his interrupted regeneration.

“In the end, understanding why your regeneration stopped is the easiest thing to do. One of the advantages of having a sentient spaceship is that sometimes you don’t even have to set a destination – she will know. And this once, it was as if she already knew where to go and why we needed to find you, so she made her way into the Vortex, and there you go! Your TARDIS was absorbed by my TARDIS in time for it to stop the golden regeneration energy that was floating out of your body in every possible direction. Mystery solved! Well, sort of. There are still some loose ends. Well, quite a lot of them, to be honest.”
“If anyone could ever have done something like that,” the Tenth Doctor said unexpectedly, thoughtful brown eyes staring into nothingness and a discreet but fond smile on his face, “it would most assuredly have been her.”

The Eleventh Doctor knew that, by ‘her’, he hadn’t meant the TARDIS.

The Doctors’ eyes met, and the way they looked at one another indicated that, once more, not needing words to be said at all, they concurred. On each of their faces there was a grin exposing an unqualified feeling of pride, as well as a gaze betraying an unbearable feeling of sadness.

“Yes,” the Eleventh Doctor replied, “yes, I guess you’re right. She was no ordinary human after all, was she?”

“Don’t say it like that, please,” begged the Tenth Doctor, pain in his eyes and his voice. “I used past tenses to talk about her before, but you have just made it sound as if she were dead.”

“We’re time travellers, so she’ll never be completely dead to us, will she? If we stick to your timeline, of course she’s not. But if you take a look at mine… Well, you’d better not. Spoilers and all those things. You know, the usual stuff. The thing is, it’s been centuries for me.”

The child who just minutes before had been in such good spirits after getting his favourite toy for Christmas had suddenly turned into the shadow of an old man, eyes motionless and void of emotion.

“Sometimes,” the Eleventh Doctor continued, “there’s just a blurry picture of her in my head, but some other times, even after all these centuries, I can see her so vividly – always young, always brave, always smiling.”

“You don’t need to describe her to me – I’ve always remembered what she looked like. Besides, I’ve just seen her,” the Tenth Doctor continued. “Right before you came. I went there, to the Powell Estate. I needed to see her one last time. You know, just in case…”

“In case I wouldn’t remember her anymore. Or any of our friends – the ones we made while in that body. You just had to say goodbye to them. And you just couldn’t bear the thought of not saying goodbye to her. I know. You don’t need to remind me of that. I was there. I felt what you felt. Your regeneration may have frozen and some of your memories may have been wiped out, but your feelings certainly haven’t. And for the record, I can remember them all.”

There was a long silence before either of them could actually manage to say another word.

“Well,” the Eleventh Doctor finally added, wanting to get those stabbing thoughts out of his head as soon as he could, “we’ve landed again. To be honest, we’ve been parked for quite a while now, so I guess it’s about time we started our research.”

The Tenth Doctor looked at him in surprise. He had completely forgotten! He could sense the sadness that had also taken hold of his future self during their conversation, so, in an attempt to give a more cheerful tone to it, he decided to start a new one. “How long have you been travelling with Clara, by the way?”

“Can’t really say… Not for long, I think. But I am never sure about those things anymore. And it’s been complicated. I mean, really, unbelievably complicated.”

“Isn’t it always like that?” the Tenth Doctor joked. “You said it’s been centuries for you. Did you use to travel alone before you met her?”
“No.” The Eleventh Doctor’s eyes saddened again. “I was… I had these friends… The Ponds… I… I used to travel with them. Amelia Pond. And Rory. You would have loved them. They were… Magnificent.”

“What happened to them?” the Tenth Doctor asked, in a tone which suggested he already knew the answer to that question. How could he have made such a terrible mistake? He should have known better than to stick to the subject of companions.

The Eleventh Doctor looked down and kept his mourning eyes fixed on the console for a while.

“I’m sorry,” the Tenth Doctor said.

“I know,” his future self replied.
The Great Pretender

Chapter Notes

Many thanks once again to my dear NoPondInTheForest! The title of this chapter is clearly inspired by that wonderful song all of you know really well, I'm sure! There's another song you'll find bits of in this chapter, "What is a youth?", which appears in Nino Rota’s score for Franco Zeffirelli’s stunning version of "Romeo and Juliet".

London, 17th May 1600, 12:00 am

Even to the human mind it is often extraordinary how slowly time may seem to pass by when one is in a state of panic.

The thirty odd seconds that went by from the moment the TARDIS disappeared until it materialised again felt like thirty odd hours for Clara. Not any less amazing than the slowness of such lapse of time had been the countless and unbelievable thoughts that had run through her head while it lasted. Why? Why would the Doctors leave her stranded in the 1600s? Should they even have a reason to do that? It just didn’t make any sense to her… What on earth must have happened? She knew the Doctor – her Doctor – well, and she knew it was not at all like him to do something like that unless he had a good reason. So what reason could he possibly have? What had happened during that journey to Elizabethan England? Well, she and her Doctor had been telling the other Doctor about the salvation of Gallifrey, and about all the people and aliens that had taken part in it, and they had given him every single detail that had come to their minds. And it was true – he had been a bit incredulous at first, but after a while he seemed to have come to terms with their tale without having to make too much of an effort. Then they landed and she opened the door, and when she gazed upon the dark starry sky and felt the cold night air on her face, she felt the impulse to step outside the TARDIS for just a brief while – and only seconds later, they were gone!

But they would come back, wouldn’t they? Because if they didn’t… Well, what would she do if they didn’t? ’Cause even if they had had a good reason, she also knew that, at times, things didn’t necessarily go the way the Doctor had expected, and Elizabethan England was certainly not the era she would have chosen to get trapped in at all. She definitely couldn’t go anywhere near the Queen under any circumstances, lest she should be recognised, but the prospect of ending her days hiding in the countryside and living as a peasant didn’t exactly make her jump with joy either… Oh dear. What would she do? Oh, hang on a minute, maybe this was just the TARDIS playing yet another trick on her… Or maybe it had developed some kind of fault and all this was just an unhappy but insignificant accident?

Her head was on the brink of starting to spin when she heard a very familiar and at that time soothing sound. She turned around, looked left, and saw the TARDIS materialising in a wood right opposite. Sighing with relief, she closed her eyes and smiled, as she had just fathomed that the Doctors’ motive for deciding to leave for such a brief while had been the TARDIS, which couldn’t possibly have been left parked right there in plain sight, where it had first materialised, so they had thought it best to hide it among the trees in the wood.

It all seemed so very obvious now that she couldn’t help but feel a bit silly.
Several minutes passed and none of the Doctors stepped out of the TARDIS though, which, Clara thought, was quite unusual. She walked towards the wood slowly and came to a halt only a few metres away from the spaceship, but there weren’t any Doctors getting out of it yet. She raised her forearm and clenched her fist with the intention of knocking at the door, but on second thoughts, she decided not to get in and wait for them outside instead. When the door surprisingly opened an instant later and the Eleventh Doctor’s eyes met hers, he jumped out of the TARDIS and held her in a tight embrace.

“Clara,” he said, his voice sounding, much to her surprise, a bit melancholic and also quite emotional, “Clara Oswald. Don’t you ever dare leave me. Did you hear that?”

“Doctor?” she asked, disconcerted not only by his unexpected demand, but also by the strength of his arms as they kept holding her close to him, “are you alright?”

“Yes,” he replied, softening her grip on her and smiling, “yes I am.”

“It’s funny that you should tell me that when a moment ago I was thinking I was the one who’d been abandoned... What have you two been doing?”

“Oh, nothing in particular,” he went on, distracted, “We were just talking and... Well, have you got a plan? You’re always great at making plans!”

“Oh am I? Thanks! You’re not great at being elusive, though” she replied, quickly giving up. “I did have a plan before, certainly, and let me remind you, so did you! Originally, the plan was, first, finding the Tenth Doctor, who...”

“Right here! Hello!” replied the Tenth Doctor, who was leaning on the TARDIS door, waving them hello with a quick movement of his fingers.

“...who we have already found, and then, travelling to Elizabethan England to do some research.”

“Okay, so here’s Number Ten, and here we are, London, May 1600! So far, so good,” the Eleventh Doctor replied excitedly. “And the rest of the plan?”

“There’s no rest of the plan.”

“If you don’t mind my intruding,” the Tenth Doctor interrupted, “what exactly is your idea of doing research?”

“That’s what the rest of the plan is about!” said the Eleventh Doctor even more excitedly than before.

“Which means,” the Tenth Doctor continued, “you really don’t have a plan. Okay! Now I get it. Actually, it’s brilliant! I love not having a plan!” the Tenth Doctor replied, his face shining. Clara would have sworn he looked a bit grim when they arrived, but whatever the reason, it was now gone. “Then shall we walk into town? See what we can find out?”

With his usual childish smile – the one that Clara had seen on his lips a million times, whenever he was really excited – an enthusiastic Eleventh Doctor nodded, and in a matter of milliseconds, the two Time Lords were leading the way right in front of her. Clara, however, didn’t move.

“But... Doctors!” she interrupted. “Sorry for being such a spoilsport, but... Why didn’t you leave the TARDIS in that spot over there?”

“Because it had to be hidden,” replied the Eleventh Doctor. “How could we just leave her there in
the middle of the countryside without taking any precautions? Then Queen’s guards might have found it, or even worse – the Queen herself might have seen it and realised we were here!"

“So you are concerned that the Queen or her men might have seen the TARDIS, but not that they might see us. Because if we walk into town like this, and the Queen or any of her men happens to recognise us, you know what’s going to happen, right? No mystery to solve, no disaster to prevent. Just… Off with our heads!”

The Doctors’ smiles faded as they stopped and looked at each other. Clara was absolutely right, and none of them, in their excitement, had even considered that possibility.

“Well,” the Tenth Doctor started, rubbing the back of his neck, “I wasn’t exactly planning on getting anywhere near the Queen. But that doesn’t make your warning any less important, Clara. Of course, we might still just be seen.”

“Shouldn’t we at least wear masks or something?” she asked.

“Then why did we even come here?” the Eleventh Doctor added. “What was the point? If we cannot get anywhere near the Queen, how are we supposed to find out what’s really going on?”

“So, let’s wear masks!”

“It’s not as simple as that, Clara,” the Tenth Doctor explained. “I mean, of course we absolutely need to wear masks…”

“And hoods,” the Eleventh Doctor interrupted.

“And hoods, yes, but what is really important here is that w…”

“And also tunics,” the Eleventh Doctor interrupted again.

“Tunics! Yes! Also tunics! Are you done?” shouted the Tenth Doctor, visibly annoyed by the constant interruptions. “Honestly, the thought of any living creature wearing those three things altogether is absolutely terrifying, so could you stop it? Anyway, that will only allow us to mingle with the locals and listen to their stories, which might be helpful, but it might also not be helpful… What if only the Queen and those closer to her know about her plans?”

“We need ears at court,” the Eleventh Doctor concluded. “We need a spy! We need some kind of double agent to keep an eye on the Queen and tell us about her every move.”

“There goes our only hope, then!” said the Tenth Doctor. “I was thinking of William Shakespeare, and I’m sure he would’ve been more than willing to help, but if the plan is having someone infiltrated at court, forget it! The Queen saw me with him at the Globe once, so I’m afraid neither him nor any of the actors in his company will be of any help. She’s really clever, and it wouldn’t take her long to put two and two together if she suspected there might be some kind of connection between us and our secret agent… Oh, come on, Doctor, think!” he exclaimed, tapping his temples with his fingers. "Surely, in all these years we must have met someone who can give us a hand here at some point…”

“I met Mata Hari once,” the Eleventh Doctor said, “but I doubt she’d want to help us. I even doubt she’d want to speak to me again…”

“Who knows what you must’ve done to her…” added Clara. “Well, I’m sorry Doctor, but I don’t think even Mata Hari herself would be of much help here either. What we need is… James Bond! If only he was real, that is.”
“I also met Ian Fleming once, but I don’t think he would agree to all this... I’m afraid the Queen’s not his type,” said the Eleventh Doctor.

“What exactly do you have in mind, Clara?” the Tenth Doctor asked her.

“Well, it’s just that, when we met the Queen, she was desperate to find a man who would tie the knot with her, that was clear as day! You kept insulting her, laughing at her and offending her, and even so, she would still have you, which was quite incomprehensible to be honest, but that’s how it was! So what I’m thinking is, if only we could find someone who would sing along to her tune for a couple of days and pretend to be in love with her... That would be perfect! Don’t you think we could try and find a handsome young man in sixteenth century London who would do that much for us? The Queen must have lots of opposition…”

“But Clara,” the Eleventh Doctor asked her in a serious tone, “what if everything went terribly wrong? You know what would happen to that young man, don’t you? And we definitely won’t put an innocent’s life in danger.”

“Oh!” the Tenth Doctor suddenly shouted, taking his right hand to his forehead, eyes wide open, staring into the darkness. With the broadest grin she had seen in her whole life, he walked towards Clara and lifted her up from the ground so high above that he had to raise his head about ninety degrees to be able to look her in the eye. “Clara...! I’m sorry, what was your full name again?”

“Oswald, Doctor. Clara Oswald,” she replied trying not to sound rude at all, as talking to someone from such a place and in such position happened to be the most uncomfortable thing she had ever done. “Can you put me down now?”

“Well, Clara Oswald, let me tell you, you’re a star! Oh yes you are!”

He put her back on the ground and ran towards the TARDIS, while the other Doctor and Clara kept looking at him, wondering what he might be up to.

“What?” the Eleventh Doctor asked, quite puzzled. “What is it? Are you not going to tell us?”

“Back in a mo! Don’t move! I’ll be right here before you even blink!”

“What?!” the Eleventh Doctor said in alarm, as he saw his previous self get back into the TARDIS. “What are you doing?! Your TARDIS is momentarily dead, let me remind you, and mine is cutting edge! State-of-the-art! Too complicated for you! I don’t think you’ll be able to fly it!”

“No, you won’t! My console room is quite different from yours! It’s got all these new controls which usually prevent spacy-wacey stuff from happening... And which do not always work anyway....”

“I’ll manage! Don’t worry about that!” the Tenth Doctor shouted from the console room one more time, and poking his head through the door he had previously left ajar, added, “I’ll be right back,” with a silly smile, a rising eyebrow, and a wink, before heading towards the console and closing the door.

“But won’t you at least tell us where you’re going?”

Only two seconds went by before the Doctor opened the door and poked his head through it again to explain.
“Forget about that hiring a local thing. Didn’t you think Clara’s suggestion was brilliant?”

“Yes, I did. Why?”

“Well, if what we’re dealing with is a woman who is desperately in need of a man, any man, who will pay just a tiny little bit of attention to her, no matter if he really can’t stand her or keeps mocking her or is constantly making fun of her, and all we really need is a handsome young man to willingly seduce her, and preferably a man whose life we will never under any circumstance be putting in danger… Well, I’m happy to say, I think I know just the man!”

He didn’t stay to witness the sudden look of understanding and broad smile on his future self’s face, since, with those spirited words and another ear-to-ear smile, the Tenth Doctor finally closed the door.

And it only took him twenty-seven minutes and twenty-two seconds to manage with the new console and make the TARDIS dematerialise.

*****

Almost two hours later, the Doctor and Clara were sitting shoulder to shoulder on the wet grass, fast asleep, their backs resting against the trunk of a tree, when the sound of the TARDIS materialising startled them. They quickly opened their eyes, held hands and jumped up, and they were already standing right opposite the door when it was opened by the Tenth Doctor, who remained inside the ship holding it. He smiled at them with satisfaction, an indication that his plan, much to his pleasure, had succeeded.

It had been her idea to find a handsome young man who would easily gain the Queen’s favour, but Clara had certainly not expected her own jaw to drop to the floor at the sight of such man as he walked out of the TARDIS. He might not be as young as she had expected, but he was decidedly very attractive. He had the lightest blue eyes and the most perfect teeth she had ever seen, and his bright devilish smile made her blush, there was such an air of self-confidence about him. Unable to say a word, she just stood there looking at him with her eyes and mouth wide open and realizing how stupid she must look, but doing nothing about it.

The Eleventh Doctor’s hearts had surely jumped with joy at the sight of the visitor’s face, in spite of which he took a moment to admire the newcomer’s distinguished attire. He was wearing an impeccable Renaissance Court outfit which combined dark blue velvet and bright white silk elaborately embroidered with silver thread, and with pieces of silver jewellery scattered all over the doublet, the jerkin, and the pants. He was also wearing white stockings and blue shoes, a shoulder cloak, a sword cloak, and a blue velvet hat with enormous blue and white plumes.

Lifting his right arm, the stranger spent a few seconds searching for something he was keeping inside his sword cloak. Clara assumed that it would obviously be a sword, so a giggle escaped her throat when, to her amazement, it turned out to be a lute.

After the few seconds the three of them spent in contemplation of one another, the man walked towards Clara, took her hand and brought it to his mouth. Looking at her seductively, he kissed her knuckles intensely and then proceeded to introduce himself.

“Lord Boeshane, of the Boeshane Peninsula. And who might you be?”
He also had a beautiful voice. Had she heard an American accent?

“Lord Boeshane of the Boeshane Peninsula?” the Tenth Doctor interrupted, his face twisting in a grimace of disgust. “Where did you get that from? It’s pretty rubbish!”

“Says who? Sir Doctor of TARDIS?” Lord Boeshane replied, sounding pretty much annoyed as he turned to him.

“What? How did you know that? I never told you that!”

“No, you didn’t, but Martha did.”

“But I never told Martha either.”

“It’s Oswald. Clara Osw…” she interrupted.

“Don’t!” the Tenth Doctor interrupted her, raising a hand and pointing his index finger at her face. Clara was shocked by his energetic warning, but wasn’t allowed any time to protest.

For as soon as his past self put his hand down, her Doctor turned to their visitor and, with the happiest of faces, jumped to embrace him, closing his arms around his shoulders and his legs around his waist while letting his chin rest on the man’s shoulder.

“Oh, now we’re in trouble,” mumbled the Tenth Doctor at hearing the other Doctor’s merry laughter.

“My dear friend!” he said. “It’s so very good to see you, it’s been so long!”

The Doctor moved his head from his friend’s shoulder to look at his face properly, still thinking that he wasn’t real and that it was impossible for him to be there at all. His childlike, innocent eyes looked completely overjoyed, which was invitation enough for Lord Boeshane, who, suddenly holding his friend’s head with a hand, hastily pressed his lips against the Doctor’s wide smile. After a few seconds, the Doctor broke free and jumped off his friend, putting his feet back on the ground and leaving a considerable empty space separate him from the man that had just kissed him.

“Oi!” the Doctor exclaimed in disapproval. “Don’t do that! Why would you do that?”

“Long time no kiss, Doctor,” he replied, marking the stress in that last word.

The Doctor wasn’t upset, though. The thrill of being reunited with an old and dear friend after so long was much more gratifying than any inconvenience caused by his old silly habits.

“Oh, never mind that. It really is great to see you, Jack,” the Doctor added, his voice sounding as if in a dream. “But don’t try to kiss me again!” he finished, his voice this time sounding as if he had accidentally been woken up from said dream and wasn’t half amused by it.

“It’s great to see you too, Benjamin Button!” teased Jack. “Aging backwards, but still looking good.”

“Oh, really?” he said in a sudden burst of self-complacency. “Thank you! People seem to notice the chin all the time, but… Thank you,” he went on with a confident smile as he proudly adjusted his bow tie.

Captain Jack Harkness was as pleased of being in 1600 London and in such great company as the
Eleventh Doctor had been of being reunited with him, and eager to share his good cheer with his friends, he put his lute on his chest and started to play the first notes to a song. Coming closer to the Eleventh Doctor, he walked around him, looking at his eyes in an unashamedly seductive manner while singing the opening lines.

*What is a youth?*
*Impetuous fire…*

“I didn’t know you could sing,” said the Tenth Doctor, although he certainly didn’t sound too enthusiastic about it.

“There’s so much you don’t know I can do, Doctor,” Jack replied, winking at him.

Then, coming closer to Clara and looking at her as seductively as he had been looking at the Eleventh Doctor, he went on with his lute playing and his song singing.

*What is a maid?*
*Eyes and desire - The world wags on…*

Then he stopped singing and bowed in front of her.

“Captain Jack Harkness. The pleasure is all mine.”

“Nice to meet you, Captain,” she replied. It took only a few seconds for certain events that had taken place earlier during such a long day to come back to her mind. “Hang on… Captain Jack Harkness?!?”

“Wow! The Doctor has told you lots about me, hasn’t he?” he asked with a look of smugness on his face.

“The Doctor?” she replied. “Oh no, he’s never mentioned you.”

“Are you sure?” he replied, sounding quite disappointed.

“It was Kate Stewart. Earlier today, in the Black Archive, she mentioned a Captain Jack Harkness and one of his… deaths?”

“Well, I’m afraid that’s a long story, you pretty little thing, but we have plenty of time so… Shall we get inside the TARDIS and get some champagne?”

“Actually,” the Tenth Doctor interrupted, “we don’t have plenty of time. I’m sorry. I’m really sorry but I mean it, Jack, I really do. As it happens, we might not have any time at all, and we won’t know how long we really have until we find out what Queen Elizabeth is up to. That, Lord Boeshane, is precisely why you’re here.”

“So, Doctors, what do you want me to do?” Jack asked.

“But… You still haven’t told him?” said the Eleventh Doctor.

“Of course I haven’t told him! He didn’t give me a chance! As soon as he heard the words Elizabethan London he disappeared into the wardrobe!”

“And it took me ages to find it, did I tell you that?”

“What? The outfit?”
“Not the outfit… The wardrobe! I’d seen the outfit once some time ago and I had always wanted to have a chance to wear it! Nice new TARDIS by the way, you new gorgeous Doctor,” Jack said, winking an eye at the Eleventh Doctor.

“Oh! Thank you, Jack. I’ve redecorated a couple of times since I last regenerated but…”

“Oh, really? I… didn’t notice,” said the Tenth Doctor.

“I know you don’t like it, Sandshoes, so don’t pretend you didn’t notice! Although I would really appreciate it if you tried not to hurt my feelings once more by not saying it again!”

“Have you gone mad, Chinny? I haven’t said anything!”

“Oh, and by the way, did you notice how it took you longer to find your way back than it took Jack to find that outfit?”

“What!?”

“Clara! What time did he leave exactly?”

“I don’t know! I never know what time it is when we land.”

“But how long have we been here?” he asked, a bit annoyed that she didn’t seem to be of any support at the time.

“Oh! A bit over two hours I think.”

“And there you are!”

“And since when do you worry about checking the passage of time?” the Tenth Doctor asked him.

“I always do whenever I’m on the other side of the TARDIS.”

“Doctors!” cried a desperate Clara. “Please! Has anybody ever told you that the two of you together are exactly like two little children? You keep winding each other up!”

“But he started it!” replied the two Doctors, as if by mutual agreement. However, no sooner had they done so than they realised how much retaliating would be absolutely out of place.

“Okay,” finally said the Eleventh Doctor. “Clara is absolutely right. We’re here for a reason, and the sooner we find out what it is and put things back into place, the better.”

They all listened to him in silence as they all knew he was right.

“So let me ask you again, Doctors,” said Jack in anticipation, “what exactly is it that you’ve brought me here for?”
Romeo and Elizabeth

Chapter Notes

Once again, many thanks to my dear beta NoPondInTheForest! The song "Sigh No More Ladies" appears in Patrick Doyle's score for Kenneth Branagh's version of Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing", and "Vilja's Song" is a beautiful aria composed by Franz Lehár for his opera "The Merry Widow".

The Tenth Doctor didn’t remember the wedding ceremony that had turned him into King Consort of England, nor how a past and a future self had been his best men, or how Clara had been teasingly jumping and throwing rose petals at the happy couple. What he did remember was everything that had happened before their arrival – namely, the time he had spent trying to catch the Zygons whose ship had crashed near Nonsuch Palace, the Queen’s favourite residence, and the time he had spent wooing what he had believed to be a Zygon version of Queen Elizabeth I, but turned out to be the real thing.

That mistake, however, was proving quite priceless at present, since some of the details she had given him about her public and private affairs in the short time they had spent together had just helped the team draw a plan. If her revenge on the Doctor had been boiling inside her for nearly forty years, whatever Queen Elizabeth I had in store for him would no doubt be something colossal – and monarchs, the Doctors knew, never kept colossal events to themselves, especially not in those days, and especially not if such events gave them the opportunity to shine bright in front of their people, their adversaries, and their allies. Whatever it was that the Queen was planning, she’d make sure she had all eyes on her. But to put on a colossal show, she’d need a large audience – so she’d probably invite all her most loyal friends, and courtiers, and foreign ambassadors, to attend on the big day. However, in all probability, there would also be celebrations and entertainment at court before that day arrived, and a party as numerous as the one they were counting on by then could only be accommodated in Whitehall Palace, the largest of Tudor royal palaces. And with over a thousand people being lodged at court, where would the Queen rather be than making a splash?

To Whitehall Palace they went, therefore, and the walk to its vicinity was extremely long and cold, as well as a bit wet. Fortunately, Jack was being protected from the inclement weather by the several layers of fabric that made up his costume, and, before leaving the TARDIS, the Doctors and Clara had donned wine red tunics that had once belonged to the Headless Monks. Even so, they had agreed that it would be advisable to remain unseen whenever possible, given the nature of their undertaking and the risks they would unquestionably have to avoid. Hence, the three had made the decision of finding shelter somewhere in the intricate network of tunnels connecting Whitehall Palace and Westminster Abbey – because yes, of course there were always underground tunnels connecting palaces with abbeys or churches or cathedrals, the Doctors had claimed, and no, they didn’t really have to do that much drilling when they started to build railways for the London Underground in the nineteenth century.

Before venturing into those clandestine passages, however, they had to help Jack get on track at court, so the three of them walked to St. James’s Park with him and were presently hiding there among the bushes. Clara had been feeling exhausted long before they finally sat down on that particular spot in the park, and the soothing lute music that Jack wouldn’t stop playing, even if
really softly, had undoubtedly had the ultimate hypnotic effect on her and helped her go to sleep.

When the clock at Westminster Abbey struck six, Clara opened her eyes slightly and yawned but continued to sleep, letting her head rest on her Doctor’s shoulder and her hand on his lap. Putting a protective arm around her and not wanting to disturb her sleep, the Eleventh Doctor had been trying really hard to do something he had never been any good at – staying put. And so far, he had succeeded for two hours, no less! Breathing obviously could not be helped, but as there was nothing for them to do except wait – and oh how he hated that –, not moving was fairly easy, and when engaged in conversation with Jack or the other Doctor, the three of them would speak in undertones.

“She’s really pretty,” Jack whispered, after having spent a while staring at Clara. “I never thought I’d live to see the day you’d like brunettes, Doctor,” he added, his eyes fixed on the Eleventh Doctor.

“Shut up!” he replied, trying not to raise his voice more than strictly necessary. “And leave her alone from now on, will you?”

“Fair enough!” Jack answered. “Something’s telling me that I should only focus on the task of seducing the Virgin Queen. Not that I want to put my capabilities into question, Doctors, but how difficult do you think it will be?”

“Oh, you’ll be surprised,” muttered the Tenth Doctor, who every now and then would jump up, crouch down and crane his neck to scrutinize the large area sprawling between them and Whitehall Palace. “It must be about twenty past six now. The sun has already risen, which means she can be here any minute.”

“Are you sure this is a good idea, Doc?”

“Not at all, Jack, no. But I hope it will turn out to be. She usually takes a walk in St. James’s Park first thing every morning, alone and incognito, when she’s staying in Whitehall Palace. Of course, now it will have been almost forty years since she told me that, but that’s the kind of habit one never changes, don’t you reckon?”

“Not even when one is almost seventy and perhaps might not walk as easily as they did when they were thirty?” asked the Eleventh Doctor.

“Then raise the alarm as soon as you spot an old lady wearing a crown and carrying a walking stick,” replied the Tenth Doctor. “I honestly don’t know! But, as it happens, here we are, this is the only plan that we have so far and there’s nothing else we can do at the moment, so let’s give it a chance, shall we? Then, if it doesn’t work, we’ll see what else w…”

“Doctor,” interrupted Jack, who suddenly stopped playing. “Could that be her?”

The Doctor turned round, still crouching down behind one of the bushes. Looking in the direction of Whitehall Palace, they all could see a tall figure walking slowly in the distance.

“Oh, look at that…” said an amazed Tenth Doctor. “Someone’s decided to put on a plain long black hooded cloak this morning. Simple kind of garment which will definitely not attract people’s attention… So that leaves us with two possible scenarios. Scenario number one – whoever is wearing that cloak could be just an ordinary human, and…”

“Oh well done, Doc!” teased Jack. “I’d forgotten you were such a genius!”

“…and,” continued the Doctor, his tone grouchy, “scenario number two – they’re just trying to
avoid being seen or recognized just as much as we are. Which means, Captain, that might very well be her, oh yes.”

“Then I’m afraid there’s only one way to find out,” added Jack. He tried to stand up but was immediately stopped by the Eleventh Doctor, who, after two hours of motherly attention and carefulness, had carelessly let Clara’s head fall to the ground all of a sudden, just so that he would be able to grab Jack’s arm before he went away. Once he managed to do so, he put his hand on Jack’s shoulder and started to speak, not hearing Clara’s loud “Ouch!” right behind him.

“You have to be very careful, Jack,” he told him. “I know it’s going to be really hard for you to do this, but please try and don’t draw too much attention to yourself, okay? And especially when Robert Cecil is around. In fact, you’ll need to be extra careful when he’s around. That man’s as cunning as a fox, just like his father was. But if someone’s likely to know absolutely everything about the Queen’s intimate affairs, it’s definitely him, so you have to try and be around him. Just don’t get too close.”

“Alright Doc! Robert Cecil – not just a VIP, but the very top of my list. Anyone else whose name I should bear in mind?” asked Captain Jack, who had just started to play his lute again.

“Not really, no. Robert Dudley and William Cecil have been dead for years now. The Earl of Essex is no longer the Queen’s favourite, neither is the Earl of Oxford, and Sir Walter Raleigh will probably be in America right now, so none of them can help us.”

“Whoever the person in the black cloak is, Jack,” interrupted the Tenth Doctor, “they’re getting closer… Oi!” he suddenly cried with a grimace of frustration. “Wait a minute! What are you doing? What on earth do you think you’re playing?”

“I’m pretty sure I’m playing ‘Greensleeves’, Doctor.”

“That’s exactly what I meant!!” the Tenth Doctor replied, his anger quite visible by now. “And how can you be playing that?”

“Why shouldn’t I be?”

“Well, for starters, if that person over there turns out to be a woman, just an ordinary woman, she might feel she’s being offended! The colour green has some politically incorrect connotations these days. Want me to expand on that?”

“Don’t think it’s necessary, no,” answered Jack, smirking and raising an eyebrow.

“However,” went on the Tenth Doctor, “if that person turns out to be the Queen, things will be getting much worse. It is strongly believed, even in the twenty-first century, that this song was actually written and dedicated by her father, Henry VIII, to the woman he was planning to marry at the time. You want to know who that woman was? Well, for the record, her name was Anne Boleyn and she happens to be Elizabeth’s mother!”

The look on Jack’s face made it absolutely clear that he had honestly never heard any of that before, and if he had kept playing that tune only to tease the Doctor while he had been doing all the explaining, he brusquely stopped as soon as the name of Anne Boleyn was spoken. He remained silently looking at the Time Lord and blinking for a short while as his brain searched for another medieval song he could play, and the moment he found one, it would later seem to him that his fingers had started to play it of their own accord.

He couldn’t have imagined how inappropriate his new choice of song would also turn out to be.
“Sorry Jack,” said the Eleventh Doctor this time, “but actually, that one is…”

“Not again related to Anne Boleyn, I hope…”

“I’m afraid it is, yes,” the Doctor told him, nodding softly and repeatedly. “And to make things slightly worse, it’s about her execution.”

“But it’s a song about a knight!” said a skeptical Jack.

“Well, it’s hardly my fault if the lyrics are confusing, is it?” hesitantly said the Doctor with the intention of excusing himself. “You should blame twentieth-century scholars for always coming up with a wide variety of interpretations for everything! Or is it my fault that there’s a falcon in the song?”

“Seriously, Jack, do you really think this is the right time or the right place for music?” observed the Tenth Doctor.

“I do!” he replied, scowling. “I’m sorry if you disagree, Doctor, but this is the perfect time and the perfect place. Music happens to be my plan,” Jack answered. “Wait and see! However, if you don’t trust me, go and hide in those tunnels of yours and don’t worry about me.”

“Too late for that…,” added the Tenth Doctor, who had suddenly got into a panic. “I’m starting to worry about you more than I actually thought I would. I mean… Look at you! No offence, Jack, but… What are the Queen’s assets again? Let me think… Just hundreds of thousands of loyal subjects and… Oh, yes! An army! Did I mention that? But hey! What’s all that compared to our impressive secret weapon – a troubadour?!?”

“I’m so much more than that, Doctor, and you know it,” answered Jack, not sounding offended in the least, and giving him one of his usual smiles. “Want to know my assets? First of all, there’s my irresistible charms and my angelic voice, but then, my very own secret weapon, or at least one of them, is my extensive knowledge of the works of William Shakespeare.”

“Be careful not to quote the ones he hasn’t written yet!” shouted the Eleventh Doctor, darting his eyes towards his previous self, while Jack ran as fast as he could, squatting, until he reached some nearby trees and sat down in front of one of them, not far from where the Doctors and Clara were hiding. As soon as he was sitting properly again, he resumed his lute playing as he kept looking out of the corner of his eye, hoping to see what the exact location of the stranger in the black cloak was. Some towering trees standing right opposite blocked his view of the area of the park that extended from right behind them up to the walls of Whitehall Palace, but in spite of the inconvenience, he kept playing.

A soft breeze had just started to blow when he finally managed to spot the stranger in the cloak, who surprisingly enough was much nearer than he had expected.

And then, it happened. A sudden gust of wind made the hood of the stranger’s cloak fall on their back, revealing the face of an old woman whose scarce grey hair was loose, uncombed and dishevelled. It took her less than a second to reach her hood with her gloved hands and cover her head again.

Well, the stranger in the black cloak was definitely an old woman, that much he knew now, but still there was no way to make certain whether such woman might be the Queen, and although the Doctors were still hiding among the bushes, it was impossible to ask them for confirmation without the stranger noticing, so he thought it best not to waste any more of their time and do the only thing he could possibly do in his current situation.
And so, he started to sing.

*****

Sigh no more, ladies,
Sigh no more
Men were deceivers ever
One foot in sea and one on shore,
To one thing constant, never…

The melody was not familiar, but she could have sworn she had already heard those lyrics before... Not too long ago in fact, maybe a year or two at the most. Those verses, however, had remained with her since then, and the voice of the person who sang them back then had not been half as enchanting.

She looked around but there was no one to be seen. However, she could easily determine where such admirable voice was coming from, and decided to set off in that direction.

*****

By now, Clara was fully awake. Neither she nor the Doctors dared raise their heads up above the bushes, but they were all watching the scene from behind them, just by looking through the branches.

All of their hearts started to beat faster as they saw the stranger’s hood fall on her shoulders because of an unexpected puff of wind. The long and immaculate red curls of the woman they all had once known were gone, but her features, forty years later, were still unmistakably recognisable.

And yet, she looked quite different. Before their earlier visit to the Elizabethan era, Clara had basically read facts about her in history books and perhaps seen a film or two, whereas the Doctors’ knowledge of her personal history sprang either from other people’s accounts, including her ancestors, her contemporaries, and her successors. Despite their different sources, they all had a sound knowledge of her life’s most crucial moments, of who her dearest friends and her fiercest enemies had been, of the many wars that she had won, and of all the personal battles she had lost even since her earliest childhood. Like her father or her half-sister, Mary Tudor – who would for centuries to come be remembered as Bloody Mary –, Elizabeth had never been the personification of kindness, but whether her hardened features were just the natural cause of the passage of time or whether they had been inflicted on her by herself or by others, the truth remained that her countenance had certainly toughened.

And yet, as she suddenly heard Jack singing, the startled Queen came to a halt to look around, obviously hoping to see someone or find something. Then, they all witnessed how her stiffened features gave way to an expression of awe, her eyes and mouth slowly opening wide in admiration, and then how, after taking a moment to determine where that song was coming from, she started to make her way to the line of lofty trees behind which Jack was sitting, just a few metres away from where they were hiding.

*****

The old woman in black was slowly approaching.

Jack managed to see the cheerful nodding faces of the two Doctors, who were looking straight at him from behind the branches of the bushes now – not without breaking one or two – and the entertained face of Clara, who was looking at them in turn.
And thus came the confirmation of the mystery woman’s identity.

He closed his eyes, convinced that, in no time at all, the stranger would be there right next to him, and put all his senses in singing as delicately and as alluringly as he possibly could.

Then sigh not so but let them go,
And be you blithe and bonny,
Converting all your sounds of woe
Into hey, nonny nonny…

“Young man!” exclaimed the excited old woman who was hastily walking towards him. “Those, I daresay, would be Master Shakespeare’s words, would they not?”

Bingo!

“Oh… Good morning, my sweetest madam!” Jack replied, giving her the most tempting and mischievous smile she had ever seen. “Indeed they are, my lady, as I am in awe of Master Shakespeare’s magnificent plays…” He paused for a moment, the expression on his face turning from unhidden lust to fake distress. “Oh madam, I’m so sorry! Indeed it is too early in the morning to be singing as loudly as I was. Oh, my dear madam… I hope I have not disturbed you! It would most definitely kill me to know that I have!”

His flamboyance had just made the three people in their concealed audience frown. The way his intonation kept going up and down and his voice was completely out of tune made them all hesitate for a second. What was he trying to do? Seduce the Queen or shoo her away?

“Oh, not at all, young man! I was just taking my early morning walk when I unexpectedly heard your song and decided to take a closer look. I had never expected, however, to find that the singer himself would be as glorious as his song.”

“Do we really need to hear this?” protested the Eleventh Doctor.

“You’re making me blush, madam. But please,” Jack said, standing up and offering his hand to her, who came closer to take it, “let me introduce myself. I am Lord Boeshane, of the Boeshane Peninsula.”

Since the woman standing right before him was trying to conceal her own identity, he thought it best not to finish that line the way he always did.

Lord Boeshane took a bow, still holding her hand. As he did so, he noticed how the exquisite white velvet of her glove contrasted with the black worn-out wool of her cloak.

“The Boeshane Peninsula? And where exactly is that place, young man? I have not heard of it before. Does it belong to the Spanish Empire? King Phillip must be very proud…”

Her tone had become noticeably dark when she mentioned King Phillip and the Spanish Empire – Spain had been, after all, her greatest enemy since she had reached the throne, but now that they were standing relatively close to each other and Jack had already risen after giving his bow, he noticed another seriously dark thing about her.

Her teeth.

In the excitement of his reunion not only with his worshipped Doctor, but also with a future version of the Doctor himself, Captain Jack Harkness had completely forgotten what would endure to be one of Queen Elizabeth I’s eternal physical traits as an old lady – her rotten teeth. But surely there
had to be something he could do about that, right?

Because, if he was really meant to seduce her, what would happen when she tried to kiss him?

“Young man? Are you unwell?”

“Yes!” he said, jittery, and still lost in his thoughts, before coming back to reality. “I mean… No, madam! I’m sorry… I just… I saw your twinkling ivory black eyes looking straight at mine just now and… Wow! I have never seen two stars shining any brighter!”

Luckily for him, he couldn’t hear the giggles of the three people who were still spying on them from behind the bushes.

“Oh, young man,” replied the Queen, “you flatter me! I am old enough to be your grandmother!”

“My poor dear grandmother never looked as beautiful as the lady standing right now before me, so I respectfully disagree, madam. But even if that were the case, your eyes are most definitely refusing to tell me your age.”

Her teeth did, though.

“Let us sit down, shall we?” the Queen suggested. “I would most love to have the pleasure of hearing you sing and play some more before I have to go.”

“The pleasure will be all mine, madam. But I do hope you won’t have to leave shortly!”

Jack took her hand again and helped her sit down before he did so himself, right next to her.

The Queen could have let her back rest on the trunk of the tree behind her, but she preferred to entwine her arm in Jack’s and let her head rest on his shoulder.

“So where is your home, Lord Boeshane? You did not tell me before.”

Oh no, this couldn’t be happening – now her breath!

“The Boeshane Peninsula is a far away place, madam, where not even the angels take the trouble to tread, except when they want to hear me sing,” he replied, winking at her. “And what is your name, my sweet beautiful lady?”

“May I enquire, why would such a graceful young man want to know the name of a little old lady like me?”

“Your eyes still won’t betray your age, madam, but they are betraying many other things about you. They’re telling me, for instance, what a remarkably intelligent woman you are. And I couldn’t be any luckier, as there’s nothing I like best than a clever woman. Can’t you already guess why I want to know your name?”

At this particular point, the Doctors and Clara were feeling as if they were at the theatre watching an incredibly terrible play starring the worst stage actor ever.

The Queen shook her head, a naughty smile on her face.

“I want to know your name so that I can sing you a song.”

Now Clara and the Doctors were expecting the Queen to take the lute from Jack’s hands, throw it as far as she could, and jump on him without hesitation, but she did not such thing. Instead, her arm
let go of Jack’s and dropped gently behind his back.

“My name is of no consequence at all, my Lord. I am just a servant! And, after all, as our dear
Master Shakespeare would say, what’s in a name?”

Her long hand was now dangerously stroking Jack’s lower back.

“And Master Shakespeare is never wrong, is he? Well, my dear madam, to prove him right, I’ll call
you by a name I’ll be choosing for you myself. I shall call you… Vilja,” he concluded, with one of
his most captivating smiles.

“Vilja, my Lord?”

“Vilja indeed, madam. Are you familiar with her legend?”

“Not at all, sir, I must say.”

“Then allow me to sing it for you.”

Jack jumped up with his lute in his hand, freeing himself from the recklessly caressing hand of the
Queen as well as from her bad breath, and started to sing once more.

There was once a Vilja,
A witch of the wood…

“What!?” exclaimed the Queen in a high-pitched voice, but Jack was pretending to be so engrossed
in his song that he also pretended he hadn’t noticed.

A hunter beheld her alone
as she stood…

“A witch?” said the Queen as she up from her seat and stripped the lute off Jack’s hands. This time
she raised her voice quite enough for Lord Boeshane to notice that she had. “Did you just call me a
witch, sir?”

“Yes, madam, I called you a witch,” replied a grinning Jack. “I could have called you a fairy or a
sprite, but such words wouldn’t have done you any justice, for bewitched is how I am feeling in
your presence.”

“Seriously, is he always like this?” asked an astonished Clara.

“He can be much worse,” replied the Tenth Doctor.

Vilja, oh Vilja,
The witch of the wood,
Would I not die for you dear,
If I could?

As they remained silent while Jack kept singing ‘Vilja Song’ to the Queen, the tension in the Tenth
Doctor’s face was becoming quite obvious.

“It’s going to be okay, Doctor,” said Clara, in attempt to ease the situation.
“I know, I know. It’s just that for a moment I was thinking about the musical paradoxes we might be creating here. This is the Renaissance and he’s singing an aria written in the twentieth century…”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” replied the Eleventh Doctor. “Musical paradoxes are nothing compared to literary paradoxes! Think about the first time you were here… Can’t you remember all the lines you stole from Shakespeare which later Shakespeare stole from you? If there were no consequences then I don’t think there’ll be any consequences now. And besides, there’s no denying Jack’s choice of songs is being quite clever.”

A stunned Clara only wanted to know more after listening to everything the Doctor had just said – Shakespeare? Stealing lines from the Tenth Doctor? That was just too good to be true! But of course, there would be plenty of time for her to ask all those questions later. For the time being, preventing another quarrel between the two Doctors again was once more her top priority.

“Please, don’t start it all over again, will you?”

“Okay, okay,” said the Tenth Doctor, surrendering. “Let’s think about our next move. Where’s the access to those tunnels? I only know how to get to them from inside Westminster Abbey.”

“So do I,” replied the Eleventh Doctor.

“Oh,” muttered the Tenth Doctor. “So you don’t know of any other entrance then? Brilliant! Then let’s get there right now while the streets are still deserted.”

“I still think we should mingle with the locals,’ added Clara, ‘just for a while, maybe just this morning, and listen to their stories, you know, the talk of the town? If anything strange has been going on – and let’s face it, anything that’s got to do with you, with any of you, is definitely going to be a bit awkward – someone must surely have noticed.”

“Well, once again, I think she has a point,” said the Tenth Doctor to the Eleventh.

“So do I. But remember, we don’t interfere. We will still be hiding in plain tunics. We just observe and listen. And only when we see something that will unmistakably lead us somewhere, do we actually speak to someone else. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Sir Doctor of TARDIS,” joked Clara. “When did you receive a knighthood anyway, and who in their right mind would give you one?”

“Oh! That was Queen Victoria. Incredible woman! You should’ve seen her running away from a werewolf!” he answered, looking at the Tenth Doctor, who was now looking down, eyes instantaneously saddened, no matter how hard he tried to hide it. “That was a long time ago,” he then added, in a more serious tone. “And then, just after she gave me the knighthood, she banished me from her kingdom. Can you believe that?”

“She did… What?” Clara asked him, trying to repress a laugh. “What’s it with you and the queens of England anyway? Is there just a single one you haven’t irritated at least once in her life?”

“Oh! That was Queen Victoria. Incredible woman! You should’ve seen her running away from a werewolf!” he answered, looking at the Tenth Doctor, who was now looking down, eyes instantaneously saddened, no matter how hard he tried to hide it. “That was a long time ago,” he then added, in a more serious tone. “And then, just after she gave me the knighthood, she banished me from her kingdom. Can you believe that?”

“Yes, Sir Doctor of TARDIS,” joked Clara. “When did you receive a knighthood anyway, and who in their right mind would give you one?”

“Oh! That was Queen Victoria. Incredible woman! You should’ve seen her running away from a werewolf!” he answered, looking at the Tenth Doctor, who was now looking down, eyes instantaneously saddened, no matter how hard he tried to hide it. “That was a long time ago,” he then added, in a more serious tone. “And then, just after she gave me the knighthood, she banished me from her kingdom. Can you believe that?”

“So do I. But remember, we don’t interfere. We will still be hiding in plain tunics. We just observe and listen. And only when we see something that will unmistakably lead us somewhere, do we actually speak to someone else. Is that clear?”

“Liz Ten, probably,” replied the Eleventh Doctor after giving her question some thought. “I think she truly liked me!”

“Oh, really?” asked the Tenth Doctor, now beaming. “Liz Ten? That’s brilliant! I’ve never met Liz Ten. Heard about her, though. Lots of times! There’s also Queen Elizabeth II, so that makes two Queens of England who like us. And by the way, Clara, did you know the blood type of all of the royal family is A positive?”
“Oh!” exclaimed the Eleventh Doctor in an excited mood. ”And did you know they’re all werewolves too?”

“Okay, okay… So do all the queens and kings in the recorded history of England know about you?”

“Ever since Queen Victoria, I think so,” replied the Tenth Doctor.

“Probably since Queen Bess here, believe me,” added the Eleventh, pointing with his thumb to the bush right behind him.

“Don’t mention Queen Bess in my presence again until I am forced to get back to her, I beg you. Why the hell didn’t you tell me!?”

Wrapped up in their conversation as they had been, they hadn’t noticed that the person who had just complained had joined them a few seconds before.

“Why didn’t we tell you what exactly, Jack?” asked the Tenth Doctor.

“Where exactly should I start? Let me see. What about her teeth? Or maybe… Her bad breath? I was expecting to find an old woman who would still retain some of that goddess quality of a young Cate Blanchett… But what did I find?”

“What I don’t understand is,” interrupted the Tenth Doctor, “since when has that been a problem for Captain-Jack-Harkness-and-who-are-you, huh?!”

“Of course it’s a problem, Doctor! I may not have a lot of prejudices as far as ‘love’ is concerned, but I do have standards!”

“Standards? You?! And those standards of course would of course be…?”

“Well, I guess... People wearing gas masks, Slitheen, Daleks…”

“Oh, right! And you mean, of course, as long as they’re not on your side.” As the Tenth Doctor spoke, Clara managed to refrain herself from shrieking with laughter and with no little difficulty. “Come on, Jack! Standards? You? Ha! You’ve even flirted with robots! Some robots can indeed be beautiful little creatures, I’ll grant you that, but flirting with them...”

“Says the man who once kissed a Zygoon,” the Eleventh Doctor cut in.

“And thank goodness, I can’t remember doing it,” added the Tenth Doctor, looking daggers at him.

It was once more Clara’s task to redirect the conversation.

“Doctors! We’re missing the point here again. Captain, what’s happened? Where’s the Queen gone?”
Many were the things that could be said about sixteenth-century London, Clara kept thinking while she roamed its streets in the company of the Doctors, but the ones that had immediately popped into her head were that it was extremely filthy, unbelievably stinky, and topsy-turvy to the point of dizziness.

She found it tremendously ironic that the real Elizabethan London should differ so much from her idea of it. In her mind, she had always pictured it as a place with a somewhat magical atmosphere, enhanced by the beauty of its countless narrow cobbled streets full of half-timbered houses with thatched roofs. Those streets and their houses were unmistakably everywhere, but the abundance of rubbish, in all its disgusting and smelly varieties, had never been part of the pictures her mind had created. They were making her experience truly unique for certain, but in a nasty and unexpected way.

“Busy morning,” said the Tenth Doctor as they entered the Strand. “It must be market day and there must be a market around here…”

Early as it was, the streets were surprisingly crowded, with people walking fast in all possible directions. There was absolutely no one who didn’t seem to be in a rush, and as more and more Londoners kept passing them by, a few scattered fragments of their conversations became fleetingly audible to their ears.

“…an’ another one’s gone! Can you believe that?”

“Oi! Mate! You too waitin’ for the big day?”

“…an’ ‘e saw a ghost! With ‘is own eyes ‘e did!”

“When did it ‘appen?”

“… an’ it was witch!”

“…on my way to the market, sir! I need to buy meat’n’butter!”

“That was a witch! I’m tellin’ ya!”

“Nah! Can’t see why everyone’s talkin’ ‘bout that these days!”

“… oh, come on! I ‘aven’t ‘ad a proper meal for days’n’now I ‘ave to pay more taxes? Bloody Cecil!”

“Well, my wife’n’I will be there at the Tower early in the mornin’! You can count on that! Wouldn’t miss the big day, would we?”

“Doctors,” said Clara, “please tell me you can make head and tails of what people are saying.”
“Well, not really,” replied the Eleventh Doctor. “Talk of ghosts and witches, of taxes and hunger… I’m afraid those are common worries for the people of this age.”

“Apart from that,” added his previous self, “there’s not much we can gather from half sentences that we’re hearing while we’re taking a stroll. Don’t you think that maybe we should go to a quieter part of town?”

The Tenth Doctor had hardly finished asking that question when Clara suddenly tripped over a raised cobblestone and fell on her knees to the ground in the twinkling of an eye. The Eleventh Doctor, who had been walking right by her side, immediately crouched down, wrapped his arms around her and helped her sit up straight, and the Tenth Doctor quickly ducked and put a hand on her shoulder.

“Clara! Are you okay?” they both asked as she sat on her heels.

But Clara didn’t reply, because all the way since they had left Jack at St. James’s Park in the hope that he would soon become an undercover Time Agent at court, she had still been feeling really sleepy, incredibly hungry and terribly thirsty, but she hadn’t stopped to consider that, not even for a second. As it was, the Eleventh Doctor didn’t give her much time to reply either. He briskly sat cross-legged right in front of her, leant forward, and then, raising his arm, he lifted the hood covering her face. He gazed at her for a moment until, cupping her cheek, he furrowed his brow as his eyes darkened. “Oh Clara,” he muttered anxiously, “look at you – you’re exhausted!”

“I’m sorry, Doctor,” she replied, looking at him sheepishly. “Please, please don’t take me wrong, ’cause I want to find out what’s going on here as much as you both do, but it’s been a really long day, it’s definitely going to get much longer, and maybe I’m being really selfish right now, but… Before we go on, couldn’t we just have a cup of coffee? It would help keep me awake!”

The Tenth Doctor gently took his hand off Clara’s shoulder just as Future Him put his own in the back of her head and drew her close to his chest.

“Of course we can!” he said, smiling sweetly. “We don’t need to walk anymore! Who wants to keep on walking? I don’t! I really don’t! Walking is absolutely overrated!” Clara couldn’t repress a smile, knowing only too well how staying put was what he truly believed to be overrated. “Oh Clara, I’m sorry… I should have known!” He pulled back a little but kept staring at her as he went on, his eyes brightening up a little. “We could go to a tavern... Don’t you like taverns? I love taverns!”

“A tavern will definitely give us a rest from the hustle and bustle of the streets, so why not?” added the Tenth Doctor, grinning at them. “And, if we’re very, very lucky, we might even overhear something,” he concluded, rising an eyebrow and winking an eye at Clara.

“Exactly!” said the Eleventh Doctor, snapping his fingers. “We could sit on a tavern and just stay there for hours and hours and hours, until you’re feeling better. And, in the meanwhile, we’ll just listen to the people around us. After all, gossip always starts in taverns!” he added, at which point one of his sweet innocent smiles finally brightened up his whole face.

“But Clara,” said the Tenth Doctor, “I’m afraid they don’t serve coffee in taverns. Or tea. Or even water.”

“Or scones, for that matter,” added the Eleventh Doctor.

“Then what do they serve?” she asked, grimacing.
“Well, take a look around. What do you think all these people have in common, apart from being in a hurry?”

“Ale,” said the Eleventh Doctor. “They only serve ale and wine. That’s why everyone’s drunk all the time.”

“Are you being serious?”

“Absolutely! And wait until it gets dark... Everyone will be much drunke...”

“Madness indeed!” added the Tenth Doctor as they resumed their walk. “Especially because of the worrying number of people that start silly fights and die in them, I’m sure you must’ve heard about Christopher Marlowe... Anyway, that’s not the only thing they have in common. They’re also quite ignorant, superstitious, they believe in ghosts and witches and fairies and all things magic, including astrology, alchemy, fortune-telling...”

Determined to always take of Clara first from then on, the Eleventh Doctor wrapped an arm around her shoulder and softly drew her closer to him, allowing her to find some comfort and rest her fatigued body on his own.

“Then why did the two of you listen to me when I suggested getting closer to them?” she asked.

“Well,” said the Eleventh Doctor, “you can never know.”

*****

Having left the Strand behind, Clara and the Doctors kept walking along Fleet Street until they found a tavern whose name – Cheshire Cheese – sounded rather familiar to all of them. They were just about to go in when the Eleventh Doctor suddenly stopped, took his arm off her shoulder and, turning to her, raised his hands in order to pull the hood of her tunic down so that it would cover her face entirely, her chin being the only part of it that could be seen once he’d finished.

“Oi!” she protested.

“I’m sorry Clara, but you’re supposed to be a monk now, remember?”

“I’m wearing a tunic, Doctor, how could I forget?” she whispered resignedly, not being able to see the tender smile that had suddenly appeared on his face, but knowing for a fact that it was there.

She turned around and they went inside to find a dingy saloon in which, despite its many and enormous Elizabethan windows, several candles had been lit. They didn’t make help make the place look any more illuminated though, probably because of the dark wooden panels covering the walls and dark wooden floor and furniture. Caught in the middle of so much darkness, the Doctors’ faces suddenly brightened up at the sight of a free table in a corner. The wide smile on their lips as they nodded at each other served as confirmation that they both had had the same thought – the table wasn’t exactly far from the entrance, or the landlord, or three other groups of customers sitting at three nearby tables, but it was the perfect place for them to sit down and be detached from them while still being perfectly capable of hearing all of their conversations.

Thus, the Eleventh Doctor put his hand on Clara’s back and pushed gently, guiding her as they
sluggishly made their way to that table. The Doctors made the most of their imposed slowness and carefully observed the people around them, while Clara tried hard not to trip on anything or tread on anyone and felt very like a toddler. She couldn’t help sighing with relief when they finally reached their destination safely.

The three time-travellers in fancy dress had only just taken their seats when they saw that the landlord was already standing right by their side.

“Watcha t’ree gonna ‘ave?” asked the man in a husky loud voice.

“Good morning to you too,” said the Eleventh Doctor, grinning welcomingly.

“You travellers?” the landlord asked, once again, in a categorically unwelcoming manner.

“Yes we are,” replied the Tenth Doctor. “Just passing, actually. We’re on our way to…”

“Cumbria,” hurriedly interrupted the Eleventh Doctor.

“…to Cumbria, yes,” finished the Tenth Doctor, a little bit upset at not having been allowed to finish his own sentence.

“To the monastery,” interrupted the Eleventh Doctor once again.

“Yes, that’s right. To the monastery. Thank you, Father,” added a now visibly irritated Tenth Doctor.

“Rory.”

Silence filled the room when the Eleventh Doctor said that name.

“Excuse?” asked his previous self, whose exasperation had turned into confusion all at once.


Rory. Of course. The Doctor never forgot a name, never mind the incarnation. He never had, he never would. Not even if he had heard it only once, and certainly not if it was later repeated in a tone of voice denoting such an immense amount of pride and love it while uttering it.

Amelia Pond. And Rory.

The Tenth Doctor honestly wished he could have met them.

“And this is Father…” the Eleventh Doctor went on, gesturing toward him.

The Tenth Doctor pursed his lips and rolled his eyes for the split second it took him to make his decision. “Wilfred!” he finally said, triumphantly. “I’m Father Wilfred.”

“Good old Wilf,” whispered the Eleventh Doctor, his eyes full of emotion. The two Time Lords shared a brief but meaningful smile of respect and appreciation for their old and noble friend before the Eleventh Doctor spoke again. “Please excuse dear old Father Wilf, he’s a bit slow these days. He’s in fact much older than he looks and he’s just started to forget things. Such a shame!”

“Oi!”

“And this is Father…”
The Doctor then turned to Clara, who was sitting right next to him. He waited and waited and kept waiting for her to say something, but she never did, and the fact that he wouldn’t say anything either was filling her with helplessness. Had he really forgotten that she was supposed to be a man for the time being? He, of all people, who had been really concerned about that only minutes before? Obviously he had, and she was hoping that her prolonged silence would eventually make him realise there had to be a reason why she was forced to be quiet, but it didn’t. The Tenth Doctor, on the contrary, had known from the start.

The short silence – which seemed eternal to Clara – was finally broken when the Eleventh Doctor felt two very thin and sharp fingers pinching his right leg.

“Ouch!”

“Ouch indeed!” said the Tenth Doctor. “It is ever so painful to imagine what it had to feel like when poor Father John here had his tongue cut as a kid… Poor thing!”

“’E ain’ ‘ave a tongue?” asked the landlord, his face going into a contortion of revulsion.

“I’m afraid he doesn’t. Such tragedy! Should see him gulping down his food, though. I’ve never seen anyone do it faster! Which reminds me… Could he have something to eat and drink? I bet poor Father John’s starving!”

“Cheese’n’bread?”

“Cheese’n’bread! Brilliant! Thank you very much! You like cheese, Father John, don’t you? Oh of course you do! Thank you again, my dear fellow!”

The landlord turned back and motioned to the counter in order to get them their food and drinks, and as soon as the Eleventh Doctor considered that he was too far away to be able to hear their conversation, he moaned for a second time.

“Ouch, Clara! That hurt!”

“I’m sorry! But what else was I supposed to do? And by the way, Doctor,” she said, quickly turning her eyes to the Tenth Doctor and raising her hood with her hand, so that she could look at him in the eye, “I hate cheese.”

“You… What?”

“I hate cheese!”

“You hate cheese? How can you hate cheese? Everybody loves cheese! Cheese is wonderful! There’s a planet made of cheese near the constellation of…”

“Well, as it happens,” his future self interrupted yet again, “I’ve long held the opinion that cheese is a very delicate matter. There’s no middle ground with cheese. You either love it or hate it.”

“That’s a stupid thing to say… You definitely never thought that when you were me!”

“Well, actually… It’s this body. I have issues with food now. It’s complicated.”

“Shall we order some butter then? Do you like butter, Clara?”

“Yes I do.”

“Bread and butter then? Most disgusting thing ever, but if that’s what you want…” added the
Eleventh Doctor, with a grimace.

“Wait a minute,” said the Tenth Doctor, suddenly narrowing his eyes. “If we’re ordering food in a tavern, we’re supposed to pay for it. How are we going to do that?”

“How do you we’re going to do that? ‘Cause I think that giving the landlord some money is the right way to do it.”

“That’s exactly what I meant, Chinny! We never carry any money! And I don’t think that being publicly humiliated in a tavern because we haven’t paid the bill is a very good start if we’re trying to go unnoticed!”

“That’s definitely not going to happen.”

“What’s not going to happen?”

“We’re not going to be publicly humiliated.”

“And how do you know that?”

“Because we’re paying the bill.”

“Oh, are we? And may I ask how?”

“With this,” said the Eleventh Doctor as he put a dark leather bag on the table. The noise the metal pieces inside it made as it touched the wooden surface left no room for doubt – it sounded like money. To be more precise, like lots of it, and in the form of coins.

“Where did you get that?”

“I nicked it,” proudly answered the Eleventh Doctor.

“You what?” asked the Tenth Doctor, not wanting to believe his ears.

“I nicked it! But no need to worry. The man I took it from seemed to be very well off. He won’t need it,” replied the Eleventh Doctor, happy as a pup with two tails.

“So,” added Clara, determined to tease them, “apart from being the saver of the universe, you…”

“Of universes,” the Doctors pointed out in unison.

“…of universes… Yes… Apart from that, you’re also an intergalactic version of Robin Hood, stealing from the rich to buy food to the poor…”

“Oh! I’m not a thief!” quickly replied the Eleventh Doctor. “Except for the day I stole the TARDIS, of course… But I’ve nev…”

“But technically, it was the other way round. It was the TARDIS who stole you, that’s what you’ve always told me,” said Clara.

“What?” asked the Tenth Doctor, who genuinely believed Clara’s words. “Where did you get that from? That’s preposterous!”

“Preposterous? What about Father John? That is preposterous!”

“What’s preposterous about Father John?”
“Out of all the brilliant names you could’ve picked up, you chose the silliest of them all! John? Why would she want to be called John if she can be called Alistair, for instance?”

“Oh… Shut up, will you?”

Turning to Clara and determined to pull himself together, the Eleventh Doctor went on. “I’m not a thief, Clara. I simply took this money because the last time I was there when someone needed money there were ATMs to be sonicked all around. If we wanted to do that now… Well, it’s the sixteenth century! Am I the only one who thinks there might be a little problem?”

“Doctors, look,” she replied, pointing to the entrance.

Inattentive because of their silly bickering, none of the Doctors had noticed when an eerie silence suddenly spread across the room. Looking around, they saw a middle-aged man making his way to one of the tables. What was remarkable about such simple routine work was the fact that it seemed to have become a bit of a challenge, as the man was struggling to walk, and to the Doctors, the reason why was clear as day – the poor man was in a catatonic state, his complexion as pale as a ghost, his eyes wild but uninhabited. Every single petrified man in the tavern was staring at him, their looks aghast and sympathetic, but it took a landlord to actually offer him some help. The good man left the jars of wine he was carrying on the counter and assisted the newcomer. Once he finally reached the empty table he had been heading for, the landlord helped him sit down and put a jar of wine in front of him. The man, however, didn’t notice when he did, nor did he seem to feel anything when the landlord put a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

The Doctors kept looking silently as the landlord turned away from the man and took them the jars he had previously left on the counter and started to walk towards their table. Clara’s hands quickly took hold of her hood in order to cover her face once more, then she looked down before the man reached them.

And no sooner had he put the three jars on the table than the Tenth Doctor started to ask him questions.

“Who’s that man? Is he a friends of yours?”

“’E’s been comin’ ‘ere ev’ry day for years. I’ve known ‘im for a long time.”

“And do you have any idea what’s happened to him?”

“Probably,” said the landlord coldly, and such cryptic answer was followed by silence. He positively wasn’t a man of many words.

“So, will you tell us what’s happened?” the Doctor insisted.

“Sorry, Father, but old Frank ‘ere ‘asn’t given me ‘is permission. You want to know what ‘appened to ‘im? Then you’ll ‘ave to ask ‘im youself!”

With those words, the landlord turned his back on them and motioned towards the counter.

The Doctors exchanged a look of frustration. Under any other circumstances, they would have run after him and insisted until he had told them absolutely everything he knew, but this time, they just couldn’t. It was of paramount importance to try and be discreet. They had no choice, therefore, but to let him go.

But as luck would have it, a man sitting at the table beside theirs decided he had something to say, and something they might find interesting. He cleared his throat and raised his voice just enough
for the three monks sitting at the nearby table to be able to hear him.

"'Is name's Francis Benjamin," he started, and the Doctors' heads turned to him straightaway.
"'E's a peasant. Lives a few miles from 'ere. An honourable man. 'E's spent 'is whole life working 'is land."

"And what's happened to him?" asked the Tenth Doctor, getting up from his seat and walking towards the man's table, at which three other men were also sitting.

"'They took 'is son two days ago and sent 'im to the Tower," the man explained. There was a fight 'ere in the Cheshire Cheese. When that other lad dropped dead, young Thomas 'ad the dagger in 'is 'and. But we all know young Thomas very well, Father, and we know 'e didn't do it. That lad wouldn't 'urt a fly!"

The Doctor spread his arms and stretched his arms to the of the table and found support by putting his hands on the edges, which left the Eleventh Doctor and Clara completely out of the men's sight. The Eleventh Doctor took advantage of that to do the thing he had had in mind for a while now. He grabbed Clara's jar of wine and, carefully running his hand underneath his tunic, took his sonic screwdriver out of his coat pocket, then started to cough as he sonicked the wine.

"There you are," he said, sounding extremely pleased with himself and putting the jar in front of Clara again. "It's not coffee, but it's hot, and alcohol-free. I've used the sonic to heat the wine, so you don't have to worry about getting drunk at breakfast. It could be mulled wine, except for the lack of spices."

Had he been able to see her big grateful eyes, the Doctor couldn't have resisted such tenderness and would immediately have held her in a tight embrace.

"And they took him to the Tower after the fight?" the Tenth Doctor asked the men.

"Yes they did," another one replied. "Then there was the trial, and just this morning 'e should've been killed."

"Oh," replied the Doctor sadly. "So the poor boy's been executed. Then, I'm afraid, there's nothing I can do anymore."

"No, Father, you don't understand," the same man went on. "If young Thomas 'ad been executed, 'is father wouldn't be 'ere now, pale as a ghost and looking like 'e's gone mad. No sir, 'e would still be in the Tower, asking the guards to 'ave pity on 'im and give 'im a body 'e can bury somewhere."

"And the fact that he doesn't have his son's body means that maybe they have spared his life?"

"No sir, it doesn't mean that. It means that what's 'appened to young Thomas is the same thing that's 'appened to many others before 'im."

"And that would be?" the Doctor asked, impatiently.

"What it means, Father, is that people 'ave been..."

But the man couldn't finish that sentence. He was prevented from doing so by the cold sharp blade of a knife someone was suddenly pressing to his throat, and the Doctor himself was prevented from asking more questions by exactly the same reason. The clapping of sturdy, authoritative footsteps unexpectedly filled the room, and in a flash the place had been taken by a group of soldiers aiming their swords at every single person in it, including the two monks sitting at the corner table.
The rage the Tenth Doctor was feeling inside him was threatening to kill him even faster than the knife against his throat, but with a determined effort of will, he clenched his teeth, took a deep gulp of air and, exhaling, stayed put. He was well aware there was nothing else he could do.

The whole tavern was in absolute silence when more footsteps became audible. This time, they were indubitably being made by just one person, and they sounded heavy and slow. What first became visible from their place in the tavern was the silhouette of a short hunchback man soberly dressed in black who moved with no little difficulty. He unhurriedly turned to face them and went into the room unwaveringly, but for all his lack of haste, the look in his eyes was menacing and deadly.

He kept walking pompously about the room as his instruction began.

“The prisoners in the Tower,” he said, savouring his own words, and in a tremendously displeasing high-pitched voice, “are all being tried. Those who are found innocent are being released without delay, whereas those who are found guilty are being executed in private. Any man who dare speak otherwise is a liar, a traitor, and a heretic, and shall be burnt at the stake for High Treason.”

The two Doctors felt the temptation to ask the man why, in a time when the people enjoyed public executions as much as the Romans had enjoyed gladiatorial games, the ultimate penalty had surprisingly become a private matter.

“Pray, take my advice,” the man went on, nonchalantly, as he stopped right next to the Tenth Doctor, who was still being held hostage by one of his guards. “Do not waste your time giving credit to the nonsensical talk of charlatans. You all know the Big Day is coming soon, and Her Majesty wants her subjects to prove how loyal they are by celebrating with her. Why would you choose to lead a life of misery and sorrow when the glory of Her Majesty’s love for her people shall be bestowed upon you in a mere two days? Wait for the Big Day, gentlemen, and you shall be rewarded. Until then, I bid you good day.”

After saying those words, the man walked out of the room and was immediately followed by all of his soldiers. Upon being released, the Doctor’s informant sighed with relief and he lifted his hand to rub his throat incredulously. The Time Lord, unmoving, was still hoping for the man to be willing to pick up the conversation where they had left off, but the way the man looked down when the Doctor shot his eyes at him told him otherwise. The Doctor pursed his lips and breathed heavily through his nose, knowing very well, after what had just happened, that he couldn’t push him at all. He then turned away from those men and went back to his table, where Clara and Future Him were waiting for him, their food and drinks still untouched.

“So, what do you make of that?” he asked them as soon as he took his seat.

“The Big Day? What’s that about? And prisoners being executed in private? As opposed to what?” Clara whispered.

“Don’t bother to ask,” said the Eleventh Doctor. “No one will answer now.”

“Look at them! They’re all terrified,” exclaimed the Tenth Doctor.

“And they have good reasons to be so,” his future self told him. “You didn’t see the man who’s threatened them, Sandshoes, but the rest of us did.”

“And who was it?”

“Sir Robert Cecil,” the Eleventh Doctor replied, his eyes fixed on the other Doctor, “considered by many to be the Queen’s most ruthless man, and if we can avoid it, definitely one we don’t want to
bump into again.”
Captain Jack Harkness had had to make a really big effort to keep his composure during the unbelievably long minutes he had spent listening to that not-really-very-mysterious lady he had met within the grounds of St. James’s Park. Her white lies, as a matter of fact, had been pretty bad ones.

A western wind, she had assured him, would carry the echo of his song as far as Whitehall Palace, so that Queen Elizabeth herself would have the privilege of hearing him sing… Well, she had absolutely nothing to worry about – if she had decided that this was playtime, then indeed play she would. He’d make sure of that.

Following her own instructions, Jack had sat down against a sycamore in a spot in the park which, despite being closer to the Palace, was still far enough for any of its dwellers to be able to hear his songs, and even if the wind had actually been blowing from the west, it wouldn’t have made any difference. The truth was, however, that no wind was blowing at all!

The reason why she had been so keen on sending him to that particular area couldn’t have been any more blatant. Being right in front of the entrance to Whitehall Palace, anyone sitting around those sycamores could easily be seen from the top floors. In fact it had been her, Queen Elizabeth herself, in all her regal sovereign splendour, the person whose silhouette Jack kept seeing every time he looked up at one of the middle windows. Her intention in doing so, ignoring all other affairs however important they might have been to her, was so glaringly obvious that it kept staring Jack in the face. She was putting him to the test, and being there for her to be able to tell what his whereabouts was would in all probability grant him safe passage to court.

That the Queen was having the time of her life couldn’t be denied at all, but as far as he was concerned, the least that could be said was that, after almost two hours of lute playing and ballad singing, Jack had a sore throat and sore fingertips. And most importantly, the morning was proving uneventful enough to make him start getting seriously bored and dangerously groggy. Not that he had ever needed much sleep since the day the intrepidity of a certain girl had turned him into a man for whom the laws of time and decay didn’t seem to count much anyway, but lately he had been feeling the need to sleep almost on a daily basis. Peace of mind, on the other hand, didn’t seem to be something he would ever be able to feast on, and more often than not he would suffer from insomnia, but he didn’t seem to mind that terribly. In fact, he would try hard to get to cause it. If sleep was the state during which his recurring nightmares and the ghosts that had been haunting him in them would return, then he’d much rather endure the punishment of being awake.

It had been quite a long time since his nightmares had started. Or maybe not, maybe those were the kind of dreams that one would have for the first time but still one would always have the feeling they had been going on for decades. Upon waking up, he always cursed his need for sleep and thought he’d rather spend his immeasurable life having hundreds of thousands of sleepless nights. Even millions, if that was the way it had to be for him.
And sooner rather than later did that thought turn into a challenge, which was the way his insomnia had taken over.

But on this particular occasion, for some mysterious reason which, while still conscious, he had not been able to understand himself, Captain Jack Harkness lowered his guard and eventually fell asleep under the branches of his sycamore.

*****

In his nightmares, he was always naked, something he had never been uncomfortable about in the slightest whenever he had been awake, but the naked him he had been dreaming of utterly terrified him.

And not only was he naked, he was also alone.

He kept walking and walking through a thick fog bank, worn out and shivering, his arms crossed over his chest and his hands on his shoulders as he tried to protect himself from the cold – and from the guilt. He would keep looking around, but he wouldn’t see a thing except the foggy whiteness that surrounded him. After a while, pale with exhaustion and cold as ice, he always fell on his knees and stretched his benumbed arms slowly. It would always require making an unimaginable effort, but in due course a shriek of despair would explode out of his throat.

No one would ever answer, and he would start to feel even more desolate and abandoned.

And then, the crying would start. A terrifying choir of millions of voices, screaming in the distance but slowly approaching, would fill the freezing air and make the fog dissipate sluggishly. In a few seconds, however, it would seem to be clearing much faster, and then he would find out, much to his surprise, that there were dark living shadows hiding in it.

They were spirits of the dead, and they had come a long way with the sole intention of torturing him with their ghastly mourning song.

As their cries would get louder and louder and their requiem would reach its climax and reverberate, he would unexpectedly feel a warm little hand taking his. Then he would turn and see a blue-eyed child, looking straight at him, smiling, and beaming with golden light. He always believed that the boy had come to comfort him, until the moment when what was left of the fog would turn into water particles and start to float into the air, just for a spell, before turning into fire and vanishing into the blackest of smokes. And there they would be, right behind it – the terrifying black shadows.

He would turn to the child for help, but his golden light would be gone and one of the shadows would have taken his place, and the hand that had comforted before, now no longer flesh but dark rotten bone, would suddenly start to burn. Not that he would have the strength or the intention to run away from it at all.

Then all of the shadows would open their eyes, and the blinding light that burned in them would focus on him, like limelight on a stage. And slowly but surely, the shadows would silently start to move in his direction.

There were millions and millions of them, and Jack wouldn’t offer any resistance. He would just stood still until the end.
After all, it was only fair.

*****

It literally felt like coming back from the dead every time Jack woke up from one of his nightmares. As soon as he opened his eyes, his lungs started to gasp for air and his head kept going round and round in circles. At times like this, he never kept track of the time he would spend trying to control his breathing. Sometimes his pain would go very quickly, like a bat out of hell. Sometimes, however, it seemed to him it was taking days, and even in spite of that, it wouldn’t always help.

And this seemed to be one of those times, he was afraid.

Covered in sweat and with his heart pounding hard on his chest, Jack leant back against the sycamore and closed his eyes once again. How dreadfully ironic, he thought. He was Captain Jack Harkness, the man who couldn’t die – and yet he had the feeling that sooner or later those very dreams would kill him.

An unexpectedly tantalizing sensation of humidity suddenly cooled the air around him, gracefully stroking his face, while the smell of fresh water filled his nostrils. He had tried that many times, closing his eyes and imagining he was near the ocean, where the sound of the overpowering waves would eventually help him become himself again, or even within a cave behind the silvery curtain of a waterfall, listening as it cascaded down the cliff into a pool.

Jack didn’t have his imagination to blame for those sensations this time. He promptly opened his eyes and stood up again, and immediately afterwards he turned around and saw a lake some distance behind him. He motioned towards it and knelt down by the shore. In seeing his reflection in the water, he realized how terrified he looked. At some point during his troubled sleep he would always start to cry, and those tears were still running down his face. There were enormous dark bags under his eyes, his complexion was as pale as chalk, and his lips a blackish purple.

He put his hands into the cold water and took some so as to wash his face. He spent some time there, doing nothing, feeling nothing, and letting nothing hurt him, just in contemplation of the blue before him. It felt so revitalizing, just to feel the fresh water slipping through his fingers, that his tears had hardly started to vanish when he suddenly felt the irrepressible need to jump into it. He didn’t give it a second thought and resolutely started to do the only thing that was indispensable so that nothing would stand between him and his instant desire to slip through the water – taking his clothes off. One by one, he piled each of his garments up on the ground, and once he had completely undressed, he took the pile and put it under his sycamore.

Finally, feeling free from all restraint, he rushed towards the lake and jumped right in. The water was a bit cold, but the simple and pure joy of having it massaging his skin and his muscles was making all of his senses reawaken little by little.

He could hardly believe how euphoric it had instantly made him feel. He wished he could do that everyday – and he also wished he could stay inside that lake forever and a day. He could do that if he wanted to anyway, he thought. It just felt so pleasant, so…

So right.
And life didn’t always bring one pleasant things or make them turn out right. Not even a short one. It was only natural that when one had lived for more than a hundred years, the pleasant things were sometimes even hard to recall.

There were times when it almost seemed like they had never happened at all in the first place.

But then the Doctor had come. He hadn’t explained much, as usual, except that he needed his help, and that was exactly what Jack, at that point, was in lack of – someone who needed him, or his help. Or anything he might possibly have given them, for that matter. Even if it had been the rest of his, for the time being, unwanted lives.

Jack was truly enjoying being rocked by the gentleness of the waves. He stretched his arms and closed his eyes, and fully abandoned himself to the soothing delicacy of the waters that were now softly lifting his torso and legs to the surface. He looked up at the morning sky, narrowing his eyes. It was still quite early and somewhat cloudy, but the sun had been compassionate enough to shine bright, just for a while, just for him.

Trapped in that peaceful stillness, Jack thought that maybe, just maybe, he was being given a new chance.

There he was, in Elizabethan London, with the two Doctors and their new companion. And that new Doctor looked really handsome, didn’t he? Not especially after putting on that ghastly tunic though, but certainly so with that elegantly done bow tie and that stylish long purple coat. His eyes were not much different from those of his predecessor, Jack thought. He had found himself thinking about them, and to be honest, not infrequently. The Doctor’s sad eyes. The last time had been in fact just a few minutes before, right when he knelt down by the shore of the lake and seen his own reflection in its translucent waters. They were very much alike, the Doctor and him.

The Doctor had many secrets, and so did he. The Doctor had often made the wrong decision, and so had he. The Doctor had lost everything, and several times. So had he.

But both the Doctor and he had always found a way to start over again, and maybe in the Time Lord’s sudden request for his assistance lay Jack’s true chance for that redemption he needed so desperately.

For washing away his own guilt, if such a thing was possible at all.

These were just the waters of an undistinguished lake in St James’s Park, but to him, Captain Jack Harkness, they had suddenly turned into those of the fountain of Bethesda itself.

He spent a few more minutes there, just gliding, then let his arms rest on his sides for a few seconds and started to swim backstroke. A childish smile had appeared on his face, and if a few hours before he had been absolutely certain that no one inside Whitehall Palace could have heard him sing, now however he wasn’t so sure that nobody had been able to hear his yells of laughter as he kept propelling himself forward across the lake.

He lost track of time again, but this time because of infinitely more gratifying reasons, and when he finally stepped out of the lake after spending a long while kicking and stroking, something inside him, he had noticed, felt very much like hope. He smiled at that realization and, as if to thank the universe for the turn things were taking, he looked up.

Certainly, the universe might have decided to give him a chance to redeem himself, but whether it had or not, he was in no position to tell yet. What he could definitely tell, then and there, was that, if there was something or someone watching over him, it was still Queen Elizabeth, her hands and
forehead now glued to the glass of the same window from which he had seen her spying on him right before his snap decision to have a swim in the lake. Such decision, he suddenly understood, must undoubtedly have contributed to keeping Her Majesty’s eager eyes intently fixed upon him for much longer than he had expected.

Indeed, he had never spared her a thought, not for a single moment. He had just acted by instinct. Well, a happy coincidence after all, wasn’t it?

Play she would, oh yes.

Turning his smile of delight into one of wickedness, he walked towards the sycamore under which his Renaissance clothes had been piling up all this time. He was in no hurry, that much she would be able to tell, and he slowly started to get dressed, one garment at a time, while humming another song.

He put his stockings and pants on and decided that that was enough for the time being. He crouched down to take the lute from its resting place on the ground and finally sat down next to the rest of his clothes, his back against the tree trunk again.

Then he started to hum a new song as loud as he possibly could.

He specially loved this melody, Puccini’s ‘Humming Chorus’… It was so serene! He also loved the way the music was being transformed now that it was being played on an instrument as beguiling as the lute, which gave it such an enchanting Renaissance flavour. He couldn’t get enough of it! He kept playing and playing, allowing the music to have the ultimate healing effect on him. And all the while, he looked up above and wondered at the leaves that were being delicately grazed by the breeze, at the flocks of birds flying high right above his head, at the billows passing by mildly with their inconceivable and extraordinary shapes as they turned the familiar king of the sky into an opaque and flawless white disc…

He was literally in a rapture when, abruptly, the more than perceptible coughs of someone who couldn’t be very far from him interrupted his musings.

Before he knew, Jack had fallen silent, taken his eyes off the wonders that were closer to the skies, and jumped up, holding the lute in his hand and looking open-mouthed at the man that was standing right opposite. Really handsome and attractive, he reckoned, probably in his late forties, very tall and elegantly dressed in which appeared to be fairly expensive clothes. In contrast with his extremely pale complexion, his attire was overly dark, as dark as the roots in his golden blonde hair, which was short and had been combed backwards, revealing a broad forehead and light brown eyebrows, exactly the same colour as his pointy beard and well-trimmed pointy moustache.

What caught Jack’s attention the most was the fact that his big brown eyes were as sad as the Doctors’.

Both men stared at one another for a moment until Jack decided to break the silence as he was stricken by the thought that the man’s presence in the park could only mean one thing. At long last – a swim in the lake, a nap and a nightmare and who knew how many songs later – the Queen was summoning him and had sent a messenger to fetch him.

“Captain Jack Harkness, and who are you?”

Oh dear… What had happened to his very much rehearsed line ‘Lord Boeshane of the Boeshane Peninsula’? What had he just done!?
Still, he thought it best to just act normally in spite of his little mistake.

He reached out his hand with the intention of shaking the newcomer’s, but the later stayed put, looking at Jack with his eyes wide open. And didn’t Jack understand the meaning of that look…

Repressed lust.

Jack kept reaching out his hand and smiling one of his usual smiles until the stranger finally regained his composure.

“I am profoundly sorry, sir,” he said in a sheepish manner. ‘I did not mean to intrude or interrupt you. Quite the contrary in fact, so please accept my most sincere apologies.’ The man didn’t even attempt a smile but he shook Jack’s hand firmly without hesitation. “I am also sorry that I did not catch your name, sir.”

A relief indeed.

“I’m Lord Boeshane of the Boeshane Peninsula,” said Jack with a bow. He loved the daintiness of the movement of his arms so much that he would decidedly bow whenever he had a chance.

“Okay, let’s go in, you can tell me who you are and all there is to know about yourself while we’re on our way.”

Jack turned away from the very confused man and walked towards the rest of his clothes to finish getting dressed.

“Are you… going my way, sir?” the stranger asked, perplexed.

“Well,” answered Jack, beaming, “I might be a bit busy for the next few hours but I’m sure we can arrange something private for later.”

After a moment of silence, the man went on.

“I am afraid I need to apologise again, sir, but I feel I must ask you a question. Have we met before?”

“I don’t think so, no.”

“And yet you seem to know where I… Oh, I see,” the man interjected, his eyes darkening as they narrowed. “It’s the Queen, isn’t it, sir? She has requested your services so that you can spy on me.”

Wow, so they had a common friend. Better and better!

“What?” asked Jack, doing his best to sound insulted. “No! I haven’t met the Queen in my life, sir, and I’m not one of her spies! I just… I just met one of her maids earlier this morning, right here in the park, and she said I should sing for the Queen! So here I am, waiting for news from her, that’s all!”

“One of the Queen’s maids, you said?” the man asked, arching his eyebrow. “What was her name?”

“I don’t know, sir, she didn’t tell me.”

“Was she old?”

“A lady is never old, sir,” Jack replied, seriously enjoying this.

“Answer my question, sir, I beg you!” asked the man, a bit flustered. “Was she old?”
“She was not… Young, sir.” Jack was determined to tease him just as much as he could.

“Oh, there you go! Old habits die hard, don’t they?” the stranger muttered.

Jack suddenly felt quite curious about this stranger who seemed to know Queen Elizabeth so very well, but he decided not to push it.

“Well,” the man went on, his voice full of sarcasm, “if that expects the Queen to have the condescension of meeting you today, then good luck to you, sir! I sincerely hope you will be more fortunate than I was.”

“Were you expecting to speak to the Queen today, sir?” asked Jack, in an attempt to find out how intimately this man knew Queen Elizabeth.

“I was supposed to have an audience with her today, sir. An audience I had been begging for her to grant me for months and months! My brother-in-law does not like me, sir, not one bit, but nonetheless he can vouch for that, as can every single one of her closest friends. Then the day finally comes, and when I get to Whitehall Palace, she won’t see me – she’s indisposed!”

Some indisposition, Jack thought.

An unexpected voice came from a few metres away.

“Excuse me, sir,” he said. Jack and his recent acquaintance turned their heads and saw a short man who, this time, really looked like a servant. “Are you Lord Boeshane, sir? Of the Boeshane Peninsula?”

And beyond the shadow of a doubt, the man was addressing Jack.

“Yes I am, sir.”

“Then Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth of England shall see you now, sir.”

“Thank you, sir. I’m on my way.”

The man bowed and politely turned back, waiting for Jack to be roaring to go. Jack then turned to the other man, who was looking at him with lots of unanswered questions in his eyes – and possibly a tiny little bit of fury as well.

“Well well… How fortunate for you, Lord Boeshane. Have a good day!” said the man exasperatedly, then he turned away from Jack and motioned towards the lake. He had only taken a few steps before Jack, who had immediately followed him, grabbed his arm.

“Sir, I’m really sorry…” he apologised. “If you would tell me your name, it would be a pleasure to speak to the Queen on your behalf and help you arrange a new meeting with her.”

“Oh, she knows exactly who I am and also who I could have been had Her Most Gracious Majesty not… Kidnapped me!” the man screamed, going ballistic. “She does not need to be reminded of me, sir. That is my curse, but it also is hers. I shall come again tomorrow, you tell her that if you want to.”

The man turned away again and went on his way at a much faster pace. This time, Jack didn’t try to stop him, but his curiosity about that man was nowhere near being satisfied at all, especially not after his recent outburst.
“Are you ready to go now, sir?” asked the other man from behind the trees. Jack turned to him and nodded, and he had just taken a few steps towards him when he asked the question that was burning in his throat.

“Tell me, sir, who’s that man? Had you seen him before?”

“Indeed I had, sir. And not only once, but many times. I have practically known all my life. He used to live at court when he was younger.”

“Then please, tell me, who is he?”

The man cleared his throat before he answered.

“He is Edward de Vere, sir, the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford.”

“Oh, I see…”

Edward de Vere, the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford? Had the Doctors not mentioned him? Jack would’ve sworn they had, and in fact very soon the memory instantly hit him.

_The Earl of Essex is no longer the Queen’s favourite, neither is the Earl of Oxford, and Sir Walter Raleigh will probably be in America right now._

The Doctor had mentioned the Earl of Oxford as one of the people who had at some point in their lives been intimately connected to Queen Elizabeth I, then. But who was the Earl of Oxford?

Who was he, really? Edward de Vere?

Given the circumstances, Jack had to pretend that he had heard about the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford before so that the servant who was accompanying him right now wouldn’t find him to be suspiciously ignorant of the titles of the most remarkable people at court.

And yet, the truth actually was that he had absolutely no idea who Edward de Vere was.
London Underground

Chapter Notes

Big big thank you to my dear friend and beta NoPondInTheForest!

Londoners were, it seemed, waiting impatiently for the so-called big day, but why such a day was bound to be so big, they unanimously seemed to have absolutely no idea. The Doctors and Clara might have been really close to finding it out, but their luck shifted the instant Robert Cecil – Queen Elizabeth’s Secretary of State – and his men burst into the Cheshire Cheese and threatened every single man within its walls. His intimidations rapidly had the effect he had intended, and by the time the notorious royal emissaries left, the time-travellers’ informant and all the other men in the tavern had long opted for silence, so they kept their mouths shut.

In light of everyone’s obvious discomfort and reluctance to speak, the three time-travellers eventually chose to leave the tavern. They hadn’t been roaming the streets for too long when they suddenly stumbled across a bridge. Letting aside those typically sixteenth-century smells that had previously contributed to making her dizzy, the truth was that Clara couldn’t help but marvel at the wonders of a city of London that was unquestionably unknown to her. Slowly but surely, she approached the bridge, and after taking a few steps across, she sluggishly motioned to the right and came closer to the barrier, her round dark eyes wide-open as they wandered about. She let her arms rest on the parapet as she looked down at the several small sailing boats scattered on the fresh and sparkling waters of the river. Standing not far behind her was the Eleventh Doctor, who had also taken a few steps over the bridge before stopping to contemplate the river as well. Unlike Clara, he was positive that this was not the first time he had seen it. The river had been different that time, that much he could remember. The waters had seemed clearer and calmer. And now, come to think of it, had he in fact not caught a salmon back then? And as luck would have it, wasn’t it a salmon he was actually seeing right now, jumping repeatedly out of and into the water?

The Tenth Doctor had not stopped to look at the river at all, not even fleetingly. Clara and the Eleventh Doctor had hardly stepped on the bridge when his back had already been turned on them. His eye had happened to be caught by a green vine that crawled up a brick wall, covering it completely except for its arched top, where a keystone was in full view. And if that was a keystone, as it perceptibly was, then undoubtedly there had to be…

“There undoubtedly there has to be an arch right behind the branches,” he heard the Eleventh Doctor say right behind him, as if he had been reading his thoughts. Well, what a stupid thought, he said to himself! Did he honestly need more proof that he definitely had?

“Well, if there is an arch right behind it,” the Tenth Doctor went on, “then the vine’s not covering a wall – it’s hiding a door! And may I add, very effectively.”

“So it would seem. And,” added the Eleventh Doctor, his finger moving round in circles in front of his other self’s nose, “that spiral thingy carved on the keystone must definitely be an indication that things are about to get better, don’t you think?”

Getting a firm hold of their screwdrivers, the Doctors buried their hands among the leaves and started to sonic whatever might be hiding behind them. It was only a few seconds later that they both heard the sound of metal clicking coming from behind, and with equally satisfied looks on
their faces, they started to push, looking even more satisfied the moment a now-not-so-secret door started to give to their pressure.

Clara only turned to them the moment she heard the loud sound made by the dragging of the disguised door, then ran towards the Doctors and helped them push. The door wouldn’t open completely, but they managed to sneak in as soon as it opened just enough. A timid ray of sunlight sneaked in after them, shining directly on a rusted metal lever right next to the door. After the Eleventh Doctor pulled it down, the door automatically came back to its original position, locking them all in the darkness. Much to Clara’s relief, shades of blue and green soon started to shine not only on the stone walls, but also on the floor and the ceiling, accompanied by the familiar buzzing sound of the Doctors’ screwdrivers. The smell of humidity filled their nostrils, and the sound of water dripping echoed in their ears as they walked along between cold walls of stone that seemed to stretch for as far as their eyes could see.

“The question remains,” suddenly said the Tenth Doctor, who had long been willing to break the silence now that there was absolutely no one else around, “why would the prisoners in the Tower of London be executed in private? This is Tudor England, for god’s sake! The people love executions!”

“You don’t think it’s all just a bait, do you?” suddenly asked Clara.

“A bait?” the Doctors asked. They’d been so shocked by such unexpected question that they grinded to a halt, thus forcing Clara to do so herself.

“Yeap,” she replied gazing at them, not being able to believe that they hadn’t even considered that possibility. “That runaway groom business, right? That’s still bothering the Queen after nearly thirty years. And I guess, when someone’s spent so long planning their revenge, they’d be capable of doing anything, don’t you reckon?”

“Oh!” exclaimed the Tenth Doctor, keeping his lips rounded as he narrowed his eyes. “So you think she’s…”

“Orchestrated it all,” interrupted the Eleventh Doctor.


“Actually, it was me! I did say that,” interrupted the Tenth Doctor. “Chinny here would just fit into the category of by-stander.”

“Oh!”

“No executions!” interrupted Clara, knowing that, unless she did so, the Doctors would be putting up another quarrel in the blink of an eye. “That’s the point. What if that was deliberate? If she really knows you…”

“Oh, but she doesn’t really know me that well, Clara,” the Doctor interrupted.

“One doesn’t really need to know you very well to know that a mere warning won’t stop you from coming, Doctor,” she said.

“I still can’t see why she’d need to stop the executions,” said the Tenth Doctor.

“To make us believe something dodgy was going on,” replied the Eleventh Doctor as he darted his proud eyes to his impossible girl. “Possibly with an alien or two involved. That way, she’d make
“Exactly!” added Clara. “Not that I’d mind to be fighting aliens again this time, Doctors, but for some reason I doubt that the Queen and the Zygons have been e-mailing in their free time for the past thirty-eight years.”

“What’s that thing over there?” suddenly whispered the Eleventh Doctor. He took a few steps ahead until he stopped in front of the roughly metre-high object he had just spotted.

“A staircase?” said Clara, putting her hand on the railing as she got closer.

“A spiral staircase,” added the Tenth Doctor.

“A spiral staircase! That’s wonderful! I love spiral staircases!” said the Eleventh Doctor, his enthusiasm sparkling in his lively wide eyes.

That emotion, however, changed the moment he pointed his sonic screwdriver downwards and its green light lit a dark passage that he momentarily wished he had never found.

*****

“Are you really sure this was the right thing to do, Sandshoes? I’d swear we’ve been going round and round in circles for weeks, and you know what? It’s really boring!”

“Of course this was the right thing to do, Chinny! We didn’t have many other alternatives, did we? Mind you, the staircase is really long, I’ll grant you that.”

“Long?” asked his future self right behind him, his voice absolutely filled with indignation. “This is not long. This is infinite!”

“You have a problem with that? I thought you said you loved spiral staircases.”

“And I do, but not necessarily never-ending ones!”

“In any case,” the Tenth Doctor went on, “that would explain the dripping and the humidity. We must be going to the other side of the river.”

“I no longer care where I’m going, Sandshoes, but I’m telling you for your own sake, that it’d better be good!”

“Doctors, look,” interrupted Clara, pointing down as the blue light of the Tenth Doctor’s screwdriver lit the space right beneath them. “I think we’re getting to the end of the staircase.”

“Thank goodness!” cried the Eleventh Doctor.

The Doctors and Clara quickly descended the few steps that separated them from solid ground, the three of them equally impatient and just as incredulous. The two Time Lords turned the lights of their screwdrivers off as the details of the place they were now in were revealed by the torches that had been lit inside it, an indication that the place they had just reached in was used frequently. It was a cold, humid, and perfectly square-shaped vaulted room, with large stone walls that were partially covered by moss. In the middle of each wall there was an archway, and the Doctors didn’t need to inspect them at all to understand that they were the entrances to four different and possibly
far-reaching passages.

“Well, Chinny,” said the Tenth Doctor, “which way shall we go now?”

Spinning on his heels, the Eleventh Doctor silently took turns to examine each archway. They all looked identical at first sight, but on closer examination, he noticed how there was something, one very little but interesting thing, that was different about them.

“The carving on their keystones, huh?” asked the Tenth Doctor.

They all got closer to the same archway in order to take a better look.

“Okay,” said the Eleventh Doctor, “so there are four archways, each of them obviously leading to a different place, and possibly on both sides of the two rivers. This is pretty much like a game of Monopoly. We’re about to roll the dice and we have absolutely no idea what square we’ll end up in, and we can only hope and pray that we won’t end up in prison.”

“What about the carvings?” asked Clara.

“Clues to where the tunnels lead,” replied the Tenth Doctor, “exactly the same as before.”

“Isn’t that a boat carved on this one?” Clara asked.

“Looks like one, yeah…” the Eleventh Doctor answered.

“And isn’t there a cross where there should be a sail?”

“Uh-hum…” said the Tenth Doctor. “Definitely is. So this tunnel must lead to some religious building close to the river…” he thought aloud.

“It might be related St Mary Overie,” said Clara all of a sudden, now pointing at the keystone excitedly while the two wide-eyed, gape-mouthed Doctors turned to her. “Well, you know… St Mary Overie as in… Southwark Cathedral? I used to read tales about it. There was this woman called Mary who wanted to be a nun…”

“I don’t like nuns,” interrupted the Eleventh Doctor,

“No, neither do I,” added the Tenth.

“…Her parents used the money they made with a boat that sailed across the Thames to build the nunnery which later became Southwark Cathedral.”

“Well,” said an astonished Tenth Doctor after a few more seconds of silence, “sounds good enough for me…”

“Yeah, yeah, for me too,” said the Eleventh Doctor, his eyes drifting from Clara to the keystone and squinting. “Absolutely.”

“Let’s take a look at the others, shall we?” suggested the Tenth Doctor.

They all sauntered to the right and stopped right in front of another archway to inspect its keystone. This time, the carving on it showed a quill.

“Mmmm, I see,” muttered the Tenth Doctor. “This archway must lead to The Globe.”

“Maybe not,” added Clara. “There are many theatres on the south bank these days, right? It might
be The Globe, or Blackfriars, or The Swan, or even the R…”

“Okay, okay! Point taken!” hurriedly interrupted the Eleventh Doctor for some reason he couldn’t quite understand, thus stopping Clara before she could actually utter a certain word which he was sure was coming next. “So this tunnel’s likely to end at one of the Elizabethan playhouses.”

“That’s great news for those who want to get in without a ticket,” said the Tenth Doctor as they moved to the right once again in search for the next archway.

They were all greatly surprised when they found that the carving on the new keystone was so unexpectedly big that it became perfectly visible long before they reached it.

”A siren,” said the Tenth Doctor.

The two Time Lords kept staring at the keystone for a considerable while, then looked at each other. Their eyes looked narrowed and their lips were pursed, but none of them could find even a light remark to say, so they both remained silent, still trying to make sense of that carving.

“Oh, come on! Don’t tell me you can’t guess this one!” said Clara.

The Doctors looked at her with frowns and smirks full of offended reproach, although shame was written all over their faces. They looked back at the keystone, their brains working fast in desperate search for something clever and impressive they could finally say, but eventually their wait proved to be in vain.

“The Mermaid Tavern?” finally revealed a terribly amused Clara. “The meeting point of the playwrights of the time? You must have heard of it!”

“Of course we have heard of it, Clara!” grumbled the Eleventh Doctor. “The Mermaid Tavern! How hasn’t heard about The Mermaid Tavern? The problem is… My brain! It tends to shut down under pressure.”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous, Chinny!” Past Him interrupted. “You know pressure very well, you’ve lived under its influence your whole life, and Clara knows! Oh. well done, Clara, by the way! That was impressive”.

“Of course that was impressive,” replied the Eleventh Doctor matter-of-factly. “You know I only take the best.”

“Maybe you do,” interrupted Clara, “but once they’re gone, you never speak about them again. What about you, Doctor?” she added, turning to her friend’s predecessor. “When this is all over, will you tell me about your other friends or will I have to ask Captain Jack about them?”

“Shall we go for the last keystone?” asked the Tenth Doctor, determined to elude the question, as Clara rolled her eyes. The Eleventh Doctor and she didn’t even have time to nod in agreement with his suggestion, since the younger Time Lord practically reached the last of the arches in one leap. His eyes moved in the direction of the keystone, and as soon as he glanced at it, he froze. No muscle or limb in his tall thin body moved in the slightest while Clara and the Eleventh Doctor walked next to him, and when it wasn’t until they were finally standing by his side that he seemed to get a bit startled. For a brief moment, he seemed to come out of his lethargic state to struggle with his tunic in order to get his glasses out of the right pocket in his jacket. Eventually he took them and donned them, only to instantly freeze again at the sight in front of him.

The Eleventh Doctor was at this point wondering what it might be that Previous Him had just found and why it was having that effect on him. The moment his eyes darted to the carving on
keystone he understood it all completely.

“Oh, I see,” he said, pointing his forefinger at the keystone. “Nice flower. Rather pretty, isn’t it? I love flowers! What flower is that anyway?”

“It’s a rose,” said Clara.

“Oh, a rose indeed! What a surprise! I hadn’t even noticed! I’ll tell you what. All flowers look exactly the same to me,” he replied, nonchalantly.

Out of the corner of his eye, he looked at the Tenth Doctor, who was still looking at the carving unemotionally.

“Well,” said Clara, “this is going to make things a bit more difficult this time, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, is it?” asked her Doctor, suddenly looking frightened. “How? And why?”

“Because it’s a rose, Doctor. Think about it!”

The Eleventh Doctor raised his eyebrows and rounded his lips, determined to come up with something really clever this time, but once again, he just couldn’t. His gaze lowered as he understood how, out of the millions of small things and big things that he could actually say, out of all the truths and all the lies that were running through his head, that past version of him that was standing right behind him was unconsciously preventing him from making even the most casual reference to them.

“There are many significant roses in the history of England,” Clara went on, much to her Time Lords’ relief. “The Tudor Rose, the Lancashire Rose, the Yorkshire Rose…”

“And which one is this?” the still talking Doctor asked.

“I don’t know.”

“What?” he asked incredulously. “How can you not know? You’ve interpreted all the other carvings!”

“Doctor, were you listening when I said that this particular carving would make things more difficult?”

The Doctor and Clara kept looking at each other silently and hesitantly for a short while.

“So what shall we do now?” asked the Doctor, looking up, as if expecting an answer to be sent from up above.

“I think we should take this tunnel, Chinny,” the Tenth Doctor replied unexpectedly.

“What?” asked Clara, shocked.

“This tunnel, I think we should take it!” the Tenth Doctor repeated, taking his glasses off and holding them tight in his hand. “I have no idea what that carving means or where this passage leads, Clara, but I think this is the right way to go.”

The Eleventh Doctor looked pensive for a while before he finally spoke.

“Yes… So do I,” he replied as he smiled softly while his eyes searched for the other Doctor, who was looking back at him intently.
“You can’t be serious,” said Clara skeptically. “Doctors, this is the only tunnel whose destination we haven’t been able to guess, so why would you want to take it?”

“For that very reason, Clara,” replied the Eleventh Doctor, “because we don’t know what we’ll find at the end of it.”

“Are you sure?” Clara asked.

“For that very reason, Clara,” replied the Eleventh Doctor, “because we don’t know what we’ll find at the end of it.”

“Are you sure?” Clara asked.

“Why shouldn’t we be?” asked the Tenth Doctor. “It’s a rose!”

The Tenth Doctor unexpectedly found himself thinking about how much he would have tried to bite his own tongue, and swallow those last words, and let them burn first his throat, then his innards, and ultimately his very soul, had he been in the company of Martha, or Jack, or even Donna. But for some reason, he had had absolutely no problem in saying that last word to his future companion Clara.

“So?” she said with a frown, crossing her arms over her chest.

“So…” hesitated the Tenth Doctor. “Everybody loves roses. I love roses! Roses are beautiful. Roses are… forever.”

“Diamonds are forever, Doctor, not roses,” said Clara.

“I’ve always thought diamonds to be extremely overrated,” he replied, an almost imperceptible smile finally curling up his lips.
Taking the tunnel behind the rose keystone archway had not been a problem in itself. The real problem turned out to be the infinitely long spiral staircase at the end of it, identical to the one they had earlier descended. Much to their dismay, they would now have to go up all the way they had gone down before. Stupid as it was, none of them had seen that coming.

When the breathless party finally reached the top of the stairs, they found themselves in a small round room. Embedded in the wall was the shape of a door, right next to a metal lever which looked very much like the one that had allowed them to close the first hidden door they had come across that day, and scarcely had the Eleventh Doctor pulled it up when the thick and heavy stone door started to move.

The time travellers stepped out of the round stone room, and when they looked behind them, they realised they had in fact gone out of a massive pillar. In turning back, they saw a broad, far-reaching nave, and they immediately understood that they were inside some kind of religious building, but one which had visibly been deprived of all its ornaments and riches, and was now derelict. The immense nave stretched before them, flanked on both sides by arches supported by gigantic pillars. Had it not been for the fact that the vaults above their heads seemed to go on and on like forever, none of them would have imagined what a long walk it was going to be until actually reaching the opposite side of the building.

The whole length of the nave seemed to be a very busy area, and therefore, a very appealing one, so they started to walk slowly, curious about the reason why such a large number of people had taken over the place, until the market stalls behind them became visible, and conversations regarding commercial transactions audible.

“Could this be…?” started the Tenth Doctor.

“…Paul’s Walk?” finished the Eleventh.

Clara looked at them, her big dark eyes really curious under her hood.

“Before it was destroyed by the Great Fire and after Henry VIII decided to break up with the Pope in Rome,” the Tenth Doctor explained, “Old St Paul’s became the site of several markets, as well as a meeting point for those who wanted to hear the latest news or gossip.”

“That’s where we are, then? Old St Paul’s?” she asked.

“Yep. Old St Paul’s Church.” The Tenth Doctor had been grinning all along since they had come out of the pillar, but as realisation suddenly seemed to be hitting him, his tone sounded infinitely quieter as he went on. “Which, among other things, is said to have had a remarkable rose window which would probably explain the carving on the last keystone we saw.”
They all looked behind them, and there it was, right on top of the run-down altar they had seen when they stepped out of the pillar. Clara hadn’t even known of its existence before that very moment, but as she laid her eyes on the window for the first time, she knew that the broken fragments of stained glass still attached to the stone told the story of a time when that church had seen days of splendour which were distinctly long gone now.

The rays coming from the rose window gently tainted the nave – or Paul’s Walk, as the Doctors had called it – in different hues and bathed all the people on it with multicoloured light. There were men and women everywhere, young and old, some obviously wealthy but many others ragged and poor… There they all were, passing them by as they animatedly ran from one market stall to another or just finished their conversation with the group they had been chatting with until then and simply moved in search of another.

The Doctors and Clara were precisely walking past one of those groups when they unexpectedly heard some their comments – comments which, to the local ear, must have sounded rather alarming.

“She’s dying!” exclaimed one man who was almost in tears. “I’m telling you! Her Majesty’s dying!”

As if in agreement, the time travellers stopped right next to this particularly numerous group, determined to listen to each and every single one of their words.

“But how can she be, all of a sudden?”

“All of a sudden, you said, sir? Some newsmongers have been killing her for years!”

“And many a traitor has been trying to kill her for decades!”

The racket that was made after that one sentence would need more than a few seconds before it dissipated.

“’N ‘ow can ya be sure she’s really dying this time, sir?”

“Because she’s cancelled all her audiences for the day apparently.”

“The Queen? She’s cancelled her audiences?”

“She has, I’m afraid, sir, and as you all know, that is most unprecedented!”

“Oh, no! Her Majesty’s really dying!”

“So there won’t be any celebrations for the Big Day, will there?”

“She might just be indisposed!”

And while this conversation kept going on, the Doctors and Clara could barely hide the smiles on their faces.

“I bet she is,” said the Tenth Doctor. “Some indisposition!”

“Oh, how I’ve missed Jack,” added the Eleventh Doctor.

The three time travellers kept walking among the numerous small groups that had formed within the enormous crowd, but were soon detained by the sight of a man rushing up the wooden steps that led to a pulpit. Upon reaching it, the man raised his arms and shouted, in a desperate attempt to
gather the crowd’s attention.

“Another one’s gone missing!” he finally shouted.

And when that sentence reached the walkers’ ears, its echo was by the deadly silence that fell unpredictably upon the place.

“Another one’s gone missing,” the man went on, “same way as the others.”

The crowd gasped. The Tenth Doctor and Clara took a look around them after hearing that sound, which prevented them from seeing the Eleventh Doctor putting his hood down and taking a few steps towards the pulpit.

“Hello! Over here!” he shouted, waving his hand. The man on the pulpit couldn’t help but see him, and the Doctor greeted him with his warmest smile and the waving of his right hand. “Hello! I’m father Rory!”

“Good evening… Father?” The surprised man hesitated for a while. No one had ever introduced himself to him at Paul’s Walk before, and given that sometimes the royal guard would loiter inside the place, he wasn’t quite sure that introducing himself to the cleric would turn out to be a good idea. Eventually, however, the man bowed at him and gave him his own name. “John Chamberlain, at your service, Father.”

“Good evening, Mr Chamberlain,” a happy as can be and grinning Doctor replied. “Could you please be a bit more explicit, since I’ve just arrived from Cumbria and I have no idea what you’re talking about? Are you implying that people have disappeared?”

Unable to believe that his question had been for real, the surprised crowd turned their incredulous heads to him.

“Oh, brilliant. What was he thinking?” protested the Tenth Doctor.

John Chamberlain hesitated for a while again before answering the Doctor’s question.

“We have been told otherwise, Father,” he said, sounding rather sceptical. “But in spite of what the Queen’s puppet is trying to make us believe, we all know that many prisoners have disappeared from the Tower of London.”

“Only prisoners?” the Doctor asked. “No guards?”

“Not that we know of, Father.”

“And how long has this been going on?”

The murmuring crowd became incredulously silent again.

“For about a month, Father,” replied Mr Chamberlain, who didn’t seem to distrust the Doctor as much as all the others did.

“There’s a goddess in the Tower!” a brave female voice finally shouted.

“‘It’s not a goddess! It’s a beast!” another valiant voice replied, and this time, a male one.

“It is being said, Father,” Mr Chamberlain went on, “that there is both a beast and a goddess in the Tower.”
“A beast and a goddess, huh?” the Doctor asked, covering his mouth and chin with one hand and holding his own arm with the other one as he squinted and spent a few seconds thinking. “So, we have the ingredients. A beast, a goddess, and people disappearing. What we need to know now is… What’s exactly cooking?”

“I’m sorry, Father?” asked Mr Chamberlain, blinking.

“The prisoners are being saved!” another unexpected courageous voice shouted from the distance.

“Oh, I see,” said Mr Chamberlain then as he suddenly realised the real meaning of Father Rory’s question. “Well, Father, what we mostly think, but nobody in the land will tell us, is that the prisoners are being saved.”

“Excuse me, Mr Chamberlain,” said the Tenth Doctor, suddenly stepping forward until he was standing by his future self’s side, “what exactly do you mean by ‘saved’?”

“Isn’t it obvious, father Wilfred?” the Eleventh Doctor asked him, who suddenly sounded rather annoyed.

“So much for not wanting to call people’s attention…” said Clara in amazement a short distance behind them.

“I thought it was once, Father Rory,” muttered the Tenth Doctor so that only the Eleventh could hear. “I’m sure that you’ll remember very well what happened next.”

“Oh, don’t I remember! Wow!” replied the Eleventh Doctor, visibly amused. “I’d never realised how much fun counting shadows could be until then.”

“What I personally believe, fathers,” Mr Chamberlain went on, “is that a merciful goddess has been sent from heaven to spare those poor sinners the suffering of their forthcoming executions.”

The noisy reaction of the crowd surrounding John Chamberlain made it quite clear that many of those people strongly disagreed with him.

“And how does such gracious deity manage to achieve that?” asked the Eleventh Doctor.

“By taking them with her, Father.”

“Where?” asked the Tenth Doctor.

“I don’t really know, Father, but it must be to a better place, don’t you think so?”

“So I take it, Mr Chamberlain,” the Doctor went on, biting his tongue for once in his long existence as he didn’t want to attract any more attention that he was already doing, “none of the prisoners has been seen again after being ‘saved’.”

“You’re right, Father, none of them has.”

“Oh, merciful goddess!” cried the same female voice as before.

“It’s a beast, woman! It’s not a goddess!” replied the same male one.

Judging by the easiness and readiness with which the so-called Paul’s walkers became tangled up in a fight, both Doctors reasonably imagined that the ‘beast versus goddess’ debate had probably been going on for a while before their arrival in Elizabethan London.
“Well, we should go to the Tower, don’t you think?” said the Tenth Doctor once the steps backwards they had taken had separated them from the fighting crowd.

“That’s exactly what I was thinking,” the other Doctor replied. “Clara! Let’s get out of here, shall we?”

But the Doctors couldn’t take their eyes off the fiery crowd in front of them for a short while, both grimacing at the sound of punches and moans of pain and the occasional broken bone as well as at the sight of strands of hair being pulled off from people’s heads.

It became obvious only a few seconds later that Clara hadn’t even said a word to reply the Doctors’ call to action.

“Clara?” the Eleventh Doctor called again. Once more, there was nothing but silence, and that was when they both finally looked around.

John Chamberlain had just descended the stairs and walked into the nave, gradually getting out of sight as he got lost among the crowd that had first been enthralled in a discussion regarding the nature of the supernatural being in the Tower, but which looked a bit later like a bunch of starving men and women fighting for the last piece of bread on the planet. As they eventually scattered when someone managed to pass the message that some of the Queen’s guards were approaching, the Doctors’ eyes darted from one to another of the several groups of people that were still walking up and down the nave in search for different newsmongers that might give them the latest gossip of the day, but the area surrounding the spot where they had recently been asking questions and trying to get some answers was now as empty as could be, making the truth as worrying as it was also obvious.

Clara was nowhere to be seen.

*****

“So much for not wanting to call people’s attention…” said Clara in amazement a short distance behind them.

The thought had crossed her mind many times since the course of events had brought the two Doctors together for a second time within the last thirty-six hours. She had even told them so at some point, seeing how frequently their quarrels seemed to take place and how much each of them seemed to enjoy teasing the other. Apparently, almost as much as they enjoyed saving worlds together whenever they had the chance. What Clara was beginning to understand by now was that it didn’t matter whether they were separately trying to pick at the other or on the contrary working hand in hand in such manner that the word ‘fraternity’ acquired a connotation that took it way beyond its original meaning. Under any of those circumstances, each of the Doctors could still be as difficult as the most stubborn of children, and being in a classroom full of children suddenly seemed nothing to her compared to the impossible task she was up to, which essentially consisted of keeping these two different incarnations of the Doctor out of harm’s way.

Still, taking care of one single Doctor had often proved to be difficult enough, so how could she have been so naïve as to think she could deal with two of them successfully all on her own?
Out of the blue, she found herself thinking of that other Doctor, the warrior as she had called him, back at the U.N.I.T. headquarters, where she had the chance to have a short conversation with him. She suddenly remembered how surreal it all had seemed the moment she took her first close look into his eyes and saw them shine with the radiance and vividness that only guiltlessness and righteousness could have conferred them. She also remembered how in that moment she had wished she could see that look in her Doctor’s eyes more often, if she had not, it was because of the toll that his drastic decision to put an end to the Time War had been taking on him ever since. And yet, truth, impossible as she had thought it could be, there was still another Time Lord whose eyes she now found to be even more excruciating. The melancholy on his predecessor’s gaze appeared in fact to have no end.

But now that Gallifrey had been saved and their wrongs righted, she couldn’t help but wonder, how much longer could their misery last? Her own Doctor had been briefly overwhelmed with joy by such knowledge, and even if it still didn’t show, the Tenth Doctor himself, she was sure, would soon understand the blissful implications his of other selves’ and his own actions. As for the other Doctor, the warrior, however fast his memories might have been wiped out, he would never be the same man again.

*Run, you clever boy, and remember.*

She was certainly starting to like the sound of those six words.

Her attention was suddenly drawn to the heartbreaking sound of someone weeping bitterly not far away from her. She slowly parted from the crowd around her with the intention of locating the place that sound was coming from, and it didn’t take her long to spot a middle-aged man sitting on one of the few pews that had not been taken away from the interior of the church. She came closer and, without hesitation, sat down right next to him, then gently put her hand on his shoulder.

“Are you alright, sir?” she asked, but as she had anticipated, not only did the man not answer her question at all – he didn’t even raise his head to look at her. In spite of that, she went on. “I’m sorry, sir, I… I don’t mean to intrude. Please don’t think I’m one of those people who come to this place in search for gossip, ‘cause I’m not. I just want to help, if that’s at all possible.”

The man finally looked up, his complexion as pale as death and his eyes red and swollen, and Clara couldn’t help but get surprised when she realised she’d seen that face before. It was Francis Benjamin, the man who had managed to shut them all up the moment he stepped into the Cheshire Cheese.

“Mr Benjamin,” she went on, “I know who you are, sir. I saw you in the tavern this morning and I know what’s happened to your son.”

“No, you don’t!” an inconsolable Mr Benjamin sobbed. “You can’t possibly know what’s ‘appened to my son, young lass… ‘Cause nobody does!”

An inconsolable Mr Benjamin still didn’t say a word.

“Still, my friends… They can help. If you just told them everything you know…”

“I dunno anything!” he cried out desperately. “I dunno whether my own son’s still alive! I went to the Tower this morning and they told ‘e’d been be’eaded, but yu know what? I don’t believe ‘em!”

Clara’s heart sank in her chest as her senses were suddenly overpowered by a memory. A distant, yet vivid, and always infinitely unbearable memory – the memory of the day her mother passed away. She had thought that no other sorrow could ever compare to that back then, but now, with
that recollection still fresh in her mind and in her heart, Clara started to consider the possibility that, maybe since that day, she had been wrong. Maybe the pain of not knowing what had happened to one’s son was even more devastating than the pain of knowing too much, and none of it good.

“She’s not the only one, is he?” she asked sympathetically. “Other prisoners are gone too. People seem to believe they have disappeared from the Tower, not that they should’ve been executed in private.”

“It’s all true,” he said, taking a hand to his face to wipe out his tears. “Nobody knows what they’ve done to ‘em, but the Tower’s almost empty. The prisoners… All of ‘em are gone. Not even the guards want to stay there during the night. They say there’s only one living creature that will never leave the Tower…”

“And what is it?”

Mr Benjamin kept looking at Clara but seemed unwilling to answer her question.

“Mr Benjamin,” she went on self-confidently, “you’ve got to believe me. We can help you, I know we can. But you must tell me everything you know, however irrelevant or unimportant it may seem.”

Clara could very well imagine the thoughts that might be going through Mr Benjamin’s head. Who was she, apart from a woman in fancy dress? Why did she want to know so much when it was pretty obvious people were either scared to death or not very willing to speak about that subject? And most importantly, could she and those friends of hers really be trusted?

In the end, he must have concluded that they could.

“There’s… There’s a beast in the Tower,” he replied, his face distorted with horror.

“I know, that’s what they’re all saying. But what kind of beast is that?”

“I don’t know,” he replied, shutting his eyes as he exhaled. “Nobody outside the Tower has ever seen it.”

“Then how do you know it’s really there?” she asked with a grimace of incredulity.

“Because if it’s not there, what else would you expect to be devouring the prisoners?”

“Devouring the prisoners?” she said, scowling.

“That’s why there haven’t been any executions for weeks! The beast is eating all the prisoners!” he shouted, his voice full of emotion.

“Then why were you so certain your own son would eventually be executed? Wouldn’t the beast have killed him first?”

“Not if the beast is the method of execution, you stupid girl!”

Clara’s big dark eyes were void of any emotion as she kept looking at Mr Benjamin. Nausea, however, had just started to build up in her stomach.

“Well,” she finally said, after having jumped to an obvious conclusion, “one thing’s clear, Mr Benjamin. Beast or no beast, we really need to find those people.”
"I don’t care about the others! I only need to find my son!" Mr Benjamin shouted once again. "The other men in the Tower? They’re probably traitors and criminals, young lass, and if they ‘ave been sentenced to death ‘cause they can’t honour and respect our Queen then they deserve to die in the beast’s claws!"

"Are you really being serious?" Clara fired back immediately. Mr Benjamin’s unexpected declaration had instantly caused her to lose her temper. "How can you say that at all when your own son might be destined to suffer that fate himself? Is he a traitor and a criminal?"

The look of agony and affliction in Mr Benjamin’s still swollen and teary eyes suddenly became one of hatred and disdain.

"Impertinent woman!" he shouted at her. "Who are you anyway? And why are you wearing a monk’s attire? You’re not a monk! You can never be a monk – you’re just a female!"

"Well, Elizabeth Tudor is a female and she’s wearing her father’s crown, sir," she replied, repressing a laugh. Clara had never intended her words to hurt or offend Mr Benjamin at all. He was obviously going through a lot, but still, she thought someone had to try and put some sense into him. That might have to wait, though. Her most important concern now was going back to the Doctors as she was certain they could help him.

The problem was that Mr Benjamin didn’t give her time to do so at all. He raised his hand to call out for someone behind her, then shouted.

"Guards! Arrest this woman! She’s an impostor!" Pointing his forefinger at her, he went on as they both jumped from their seats. "She’s pretending to be a man and wearing religious costume!"

Clara knew how in Elizabethan England male actors would usually dress up as women on stage just because women were not allowed to be actresses – or anything else, for that matter, except someone’s wife, a domestic servant and little else, so being caught dressed up not only as a man, but as a monk on top of all… Well, she wasn’t sure about the consequences that might have, but they definitely couldn’t be any good.

She was looking at Mr Benjamin in disbelief when she felt two strong hands grabbing both her arms and saw a surprisingly short man dressed in sober black attire – the one in charge, no doubt – stepping in front of her, hiding the informer from view right behind his hump.

The Doctors would certainly have been worried in finding out it was Robert Cecil.

"Well, well, well…” he said, walking in circles around Clara, until he finally stopped in front of her and pushed her hood down. Then, cupping her cheek in his sweaty hand, he went on. "What have we got here? I’d swear I saw some other monks from your same congregation at the Cheshire Cheese this morning. Were they all female? And where are they now? Are you on your own?"

He locked eyes with Clara in an intimidating manner, but as no words came out of her mouth, the blood that had started to boil in his veins made him scream with rage.

"Guards!" he said. "In the name of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth I, arrest this woman! She has committed a serious offence against Her Gracious Majesty and against the Church of England. Send her to the Tower! Now!"

Oh, great, Clara thought.

And oddly enough, somehow she’d honestly meant what she’d just thought.
Close Encounters

Chapter Notes

I'm used to thanking NoPondInTheForest for all her help with beta-ing my chapters, but today I'm not only going to thank her - I'm also going to send her the biggest hug ever given. Thank you for always being there for me, my dear!

“Well, I must admit this has been a most delightful evening, Lord Boeshane,” said Queen Elizabeth as they walked along one of the sumptuous corridors inside Whitehall Palace.

In her forty-two-year reign, the evening entertainment provided at Court had never gone past midnight. If it quite unprecedentedly happened that day, it was because of the ravishing impression Captain Jack Harkness had made on every single person that had met him. Armed with his personal magnetism, his lute, and an excellent choice of easy listenings, not only had he enraptured the Queen herself, he had also enthralled her ambassadors, her government officials, and her courtiers, male or female, and many a foreign spy would have willingly shared the most priceless state secrets of their beloved countries with him had he but made the unpardonable mistake of directing a simple glance or a smile in their direction.

“Indeed it has, Your Majesty,” answered Jack, trying his best to sound drunk, which he most definitely was not. “It breaks my heart to see the party’s over so soon.”

“So soon, my Lord? It’s long past three in the morning!” she answered as she hooked her arm around his. As a matter of fact, she had spent the day literally refusing to let go of his arm, only agreeing to be parted with it when entertainment was to be provided after supper. Even then, she hadn’t let him out of her sight nor let others get too close to him, and when the curtain came down, she demanded he be returned to her immediately, given that, at that point, she was walking with considerable difficulty. After all, could there have been a better way to celebrate such memorable evening than by having a glass of wine too many? Possibly two? Or maybe three?

“The ticking of the clock makes no difference when one has been captivated by everything and everyone around him, my dear,” said Jack, rather pompously, before adding, winking at her, “especially by a certain enchanting little Queen.”

“Those last few words you’ve said have just saved your life, Lord Boeshane,” she said, pointing her forefinger at him. “The previous ones had felt so much like a thousand daggers being plunged into my poor heart, that I almost felt like having you beheaded at sunrise when you said them.”

“Then I couldn’t have been any more disappointed, my dear.”

“And why would you have been so, my Lord?” she asked, perhaps a little bit louder than necessary.

“Don’t take me wrong, my sweet! I’ve spent the whole day waiting for the moment when you would finally have the condescension of killing me, but not that way.” Jack came to a halt and forced Queen Elizabeth to do the same. He turned to her and softly caressed her powdered skin with the back of his hand. “Were you to agree to be mine, my lovely little Queen, I would stop the hands of time with nothing but my own bare ones.”
Queen Elizabeth opened her mouth as Jack passed his thumb over her lips and managed to bite it before he had time to remove it.

“And who said the soirée is already over, my beautiful man, when the best is yet to come?” she asked after releasing his finger, then she kept staring at him with unreserved desire.

“I wasn’t expecting any less of you, my dear,” said Jack with a seductive smirk.

That was all Captain Jack Harkness had time to say before a most unfortunate incident happened. Inebriated and febrile, Queen Elizabeth had removed her arm from his with the daring intention of letting her hand rest on a certain place beyond his lower back, but unfortunately she started to lose her balance. In an attempt to avoid the inevitable, she clung to Jack’s cloak so desperately that in the end she took him down with her. In the end she fell flat on her face and made Jack fall right on top of her. After the fall, however, they remained on the ground for a while, Jack’s trunk on top of her back, and laughing out loud in a childish manner.

Elizabeth’s ladies-in-waiting, who had been walking behind Jack and her along the corridor for all that time, ran to the rescue. They did not, however, run to their Queen’s rescue. They undertook the infinitely more pleasant task of helping Lord Boeshane get back to his feet instead. There had been no end to the six ladies’ melting down whenever Jack had been around that day. Now that the Queen was sufficiently distracted by her own outbursts of laughter, the blatant desire with which those young women kept staring at Jack made it quite obvious to see how far they would be willing to go if they could only have the chance.

Jack felt delighted, of course. For a moment he saw himself as young Jonathan Harker trapped in Count Dracula’s castle and being chased by his lascivious vampire princesses. He had been to many worlds indeed, but this was definitely out of any of them.

All the fantasizing came to an unexpected end when Lady Caroline, the youngest of the six ladies, took her hand to her throat, fear written all over her face. Then she pointed at her Queen, and staring at the other maids, she shouted.

“Your Majesty!? Are you in pain, madam? Do you feel unwell?”

The five other maids were naïve enough to rush to assist their Queen, not knowing that, in doing so, they were actually giving Lady Caroline the chance to do what she had been planning to do from the moment the handsome Lord Boeshane had got back on his feet. As soon as none of the other girls was paying attention to anyone who wasn’t the Queen Elizabeth herself anymore, she turned to Jack and grabbed him by the shoulders, then buried her hands in his hair and pulled his head against hers, kissing him with such passion that they were both absolutely breathless and flushed when she finally separated her mouth from his.

“Leave me alone, you silly girls!” the Queen shouted behind them. “Leave us alone! You can go to your chambers now! I won’t need you tonight. Lord Boeshane is taking care of me.”

So it was now or never, Lady Caroline thought.

“She will not be awake for long, my Lord,” she whispered in Jack’s ear. She then kissed his neck intently before she went on. “Meet me at the stables, sir, and I promise you this will be a night you shall never forget. I’ll be waiting for you.”

After that, Lady Caroline sluggishly joined the other ladies-in-waiting. She did it in time to take her leave with them, as was customary, by bowing in front of the Queen and taking a few steps backwards.
Once the six women were gone, Jack took Elizabeth’s hand in his. They walked slowly, holding each other’s gaze, until they got to the end of the long corridor. Then they stopped in front of two enormous ornate doors which were opened from the inside, revealing a room which reminded him very much of the corridor they had just left behind, its walls also covered with flamboyant panels, tapestries, and paintings. In seeing the low seat right in the centre of the room, Jack realized they had just entered one of her private chambers.

The two guards that had been inside that room had not held the doors open for long when Queen Elizabeth dismissed them for the night, as she had just done with her ladies-in-waiting.

“A thousand eyes see all I do all the time, my love,” she said, turning to him. “Not tonight, though.”

Immediately after saying those words, Queen Elizabeth put her arms around Jack’s waist and let herself rest on him, to which Jack responded by pretending to be drunk enough to lose his balance, and therefore, letting himself be cornered by the her. Then she pressed his body against his and, sliding a hand behind his back, squeezed that part of his anatomy on which she had been yearning to put her hands since really early that morning.

“Shall I pour you a glass of wine, my dear?” was all Jack could come up with at that point to prevent things from happening faster than they should.

“Do you think we should have more wine, my lord?” she asked impatiently as she squeezed harder, her black teeth now dangerously close to Jack’s mouth.

“Well, my dear, there’s this saying in the Boeshane Peninsula,” he said, carefully freeing himself from her and walking to the opposite corner of the room, where a jar of wine and several glasses could be seen on top of a table. “It goes, the more wine you drink before, the broader your smile will be when you wake up the next morning.”

“I would have thought I’d had enough wine tonight, my dear,” she replied with a yawn. “But come to think of it, having a bit more might make me even more reckless, and being here alone with you, Lord Boeshane, I want to be as reckless as I possibly can,” she added, narrowing her eyes as she started to rub her neck.

“Then drink you shall, my dear,” said Jack from the other side of the room, his back still turned to her, “’cause I wouldn’t miss that for the world!”

“Will you keep calling me Vilja when we find ourselves in a more intimate manner, my dear?” Elizabeth asked, marking those last words. “I must confess I rather like it.”

She was visibly tired by now, but determined to hold on against all odds.

‘I’ll do anything you want me to, my dear’, he answered upon coming back to her and putting a glass of wine in her hand.

“Well, if you will be calling me Vilja, what shall I be calling you?”

“Whatever you want, my lovely Queen.”

“Why don’t you tell me your name, for starters?” she asked, yawning again.

“My name?” asked Jack, surprised.

“Yes, my lord, your true name.” Elizabeth took a long sip of her drink before she continued. “I
know you call yourself Lord Boeshane of the Boeshane Peninsula, but what is your real name?"

It had been so long since the last time he had been called by his real name that he suddenly felt quite surprised he hadn’t forgotten it yet.

Many names came bursting to his head and all them for obvious reasons, but there was a particular one that seemed to be stronger than all the others.

“Ianto,” Jack finally said.

“I’m sorry, my love?”

“Ianto,” he repeated. “My name’s Ianto, my lady.” His gaze suddenly became inexpressive, his countenance unfathomable, and his voice throbbing.

“But Ianto is a very sad name, my love,” Elizabeth said, “and you are anything but sad, my dear! I shan’t call you that, my sweet. I shall find a more suitable name for you, if you will just but grant me the time to choose one. Do you know I mostly give puppy names to my lovers?”

Wait a minute, Jack thought. Had she said ‘lovers’? Had the Virgin Queen actually used the word ‘lovers’?

“Puppy names, my dear?” was all Jack could ask.

“Puppy names, yes,” she managed to say, then went on between yawns and giggles. “It’s not that I disliked their real names, of course I didn’t! But then I went and married the man who had the most stupid name of them all, would you believe that? I don’t know why I worry about names so much, anyway. After all, what’s in a name?”

By now, Jack was all astonishment. Not only had she said lovers. She had even said she was married.

“I see you like the works of William Shakespeare, my dear,” said Jack, smiling as a way to hide his frustration at not being able to ask what he really wanted.

“Oh, my sweet darling! Since we’re on the subject of names, I guess that now I should tell you that you probably mean the works of Edward de Vere. Oops!” she said faking surprise before she took another sip from her glass. “Oh dear! Look what I just did! I have certainly had too much to drink tonight, Lord Boeshane!”

Jack froze. He had certainly recognised that name this time.


“De Vere, my love,” she replied. “I should not have told you anything about that, my love. It is supposed to be the greatest secret in my kingdom. However, as I always say whenever the question is asked, what’s the point in denying what cannot be denied?”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Am I sure about that? But of course, my darling! I may be a little drunk, my love, but I know what I’m saying. It needn’t be a secret if you are going to remain at court, my beautiful blue-eyed creature. There’s no William Shakespeare. There’s never been a William Shakespeare. Well, there is, but he’s no playwright. He’s just a stage actor, and may I add, a rather mediocre one. Edward de Vere, on the other hand, is, in my humble opinion, the most gifted man who ever lived! I first met
him a very long time ago, when he was still a child and I had just been…”

At this point, Jack realised how the features of the woman who until then had been nothing but flirty and giggle had become those of an old sad little lady, which made him want nothing more than to continue to listen to the story that had but started to be told. Hence, it was really disappointing when the Queen’s yawns suddenly became unruly. “Oh, what a funny thing, my dear! I suddenly feel this tremendous need to sleep…” And so, she yawned… “Ha ha! Well… Where was I? Oh! Edward! Edward de Vere was born in…” …and yawned… “He was born… Edward… He was born here…” …and yawned… “Here at Court when…”

Well, he honestly didn’t have the right to be cross, did he? After all, this was all his doing.

Sitting on the carpeted floor next to the Queen’s seat, Jack had watched and listened as her words started to be interrupted by her continuous yawns and the irrepressible falling of her eyelids. Elizabeth didn’t realise when she dropped her glass of wine, but no noise could have startled her at all as Jack grabbed it immediately. The combination of all the wine she had been drinking and the tiny little capsule he had managed to put into this new glass had definitely accelerated the process and she had eventually gone to sleep. As he had always intended, before she entered her own bed chamber.

Only under those circumstances did Captain Jack Harkness dare go into that room. He approached the Queen’s four-poster bed and spent a while making a mess of the linen sheets, the blankets, the covers and the pillows, then went back into the adjoining room and, taking Elizabeth in his arms, he got her into her bed chamber and put her on her bed. Then he proceeded to loosen her clothes only as much as was strictly necessary for her to need no persuading that something physical had definitely happened between them that night.

Having reached the door once everything was finally in place, Jack turned around and took another look at the sleeping old lady.

“Good night, sweet Queen,” he said softly. “And may my enhanced amnesia pills make you believe this has been a night to remember when you wake up in the morning.”

And then he headed for the stables in search of Lady Caroline.

*****

“I swear to you, my Lord, we were all there while she argued with Lord Cecil when he came back in the evening!”

Lady Caroline had not drunk a single drop that night – not until the moment Lord Boeshane had appeared at the stables carrying a glass of wine that he took to her mouth himself the very instant she had sat on his lap.

“And what did she say?” asked Jack, seductive mode on, massaging the back of her neck with one hand while letting her dark hair loose with the other.

“She spoke to him in a most indelicate manner, sir!” The things Lord Boeshane was doing with his big and agile hands were highly distracting, but even so, she made an effort and continued with her narrative of the events that had taken place earlier. “She came really close to him and shouted that it was her and not him who decided who was and who was not invited to spend a night or as many nights as she pleased in any of her palaces. And that she said that you should remain in Whitehall
Place for as long as she wanted you to. Then Lord Cecil tried to reason with her and started to explain that there are more than a thousand guests at court at present, therefore there are no chambers left, not even to house one more guest. That was when she said he needn’t worry about that because your chambers had already been taken care of. And she meant her own chambers, sir! What would she say now if she knew you are spending the night with me? Ha ha! You wouldn’t believe how much she hates me!"

“I can well imagine, my little shameless creature.” Her black hair being loose now, Jack raised a hand to her chin and turned her face to his. “A beautiful young girl like you? I’m sure I’m not the first of the Queen’s suitors whose eyes have turned to you as soon as you’ve appeared in the room… She must be green with envy! I would send you to the Tower straight away if I was her!”

“I would not be the first lady-in-waiting to be sent to the Tower for doing what I am doing right now, my love.”

“Mmmmm,” Jack whispered, letting his head rest on the crook of her shoulder, his lips softly brushing her neck. “Then I’ll make sure this is worth the risk, my dear.”

“Anyway,” Lady Caroline said after a nervous giggle, “the single mention of the Tower gives everyone the shivers these days, Lord Boeshane.”

Then she turned her head to his, and pulling his head towards hers, she bit his lower lip.

“Ouch!” Jack moaned, then softly pushed her away from him and smiled. “And why is that, my sweet?”

She was beautiful indeed, Lady Caroline. But for once, he was not in the mood for romance – he had come here on a mission.

“People say there are ghosts in the Tower, my Lord. The Queen, however, is not afraid of ghosts, and preparations for the Big Day have not been cancelled.”


“And what event is that, my young ivory goddess?” he asked, planting a quick kiss on her lips.

“Don’t you know, Lord Boeshane?” she asked in turn before she bit his chin.

“I promise you I do not.”

“Oh,” she said, rather sadly. “I’m afraid I cannot tell you, my lord, unless you give me something in return. Otherwise, it would not be fair.”

“Oh no!” answered Jack, taking the back of his hand to his forehead in the style of a drama queen. “I wouldn’t want any of my dealings with you, my lady, to be unfair… Let me think… What could I do to? Oh yes! There! I got it! I think I have just figured out the best way to repay you.”

“And what is it, my Lord?”

“I’ll help you get rid of your dress.”

“And do you think I need your help to do that, my Lord?”

“I’m sure you don’t, my sweet, you’re an intelligent little creature, but you can’t deny the fact that, with my help, you could do it much faster,” he replied with a smirk.
A broad smile indicated that Lady Caroline had found Lord Boeshane’s offer to her satisfaction, so she carried on with her narrative.

“Well, I had assumed that you knew, my Lord, and that that was the reason why you were here. It’s all everyone is talking about at court these days. Not today, though. Today they were all talking about you. Before you arrived, I mean. An execution will be taking place in the Tower on Friday morning. That’s what the Big Day is about and that’s why the Queen’s here at Whitehall Palace right now. She’s never here this time of the year, but so many guests have been invited to this particular execution that only Whitehall Palace offered as many rooms as were needed to accommodate them all.”

“And who is being beheaded, my dear?”

“No one really knows, my Lord, except for the Queen, of course, and probably Lord Cecil, but rumour has it it’s the Queen’s wedded husband.”

“What?” asked Jack, quite surprised by Lady Caroline’s revelation.

“Yes, my Lord. The Queen never speaks about him, but it’s always been said that she was married once, and that her husband abandoned her.”

At last, he was getting to something... Still, Jack found it hard to believe that the reason why the Doctors were there could just be the venomous revenge of a spiteful wife. The question was, who was the Queen’s husband? And most importantly, what did it all have to do with the Doctor?

Jack took the glass of wine to Lady Caroline’s mouth again. “Why don’t you take another sip of wine, and then let me bite your lip? I think it’s high time I gave you the prize you deserve.”

*****

Jack had taken the precaution of leaving a sedated Lady Caroline sleeping in her own bed before finding a discreet way out of Whitehall Palace and venturing the early morning streets of seventeenth century London in search for the Doctors and Clara. He had absolutely no clue where they might be at the time, but Lady Caroline’s words had proved quite revealing, and if he knew the Doctor well, he knew that, regardless of his incarnation, he would be found wherever there was bound to be trouble. He had no doubt, therefore, that the two Time Lords and their companion would eventually end up in the Tower of London.

His footsteps were leading him to the north, but he had merely walked a few metres when he saw a figure that looked quite familiar even if it was just a tiny human silhouette in the distance. As it gradually came closer, Jack seemed to notice a hint of something that looked pretty much like contempt on the man’s face the moment he recognised him.

Edward de Vere was no fool. He had realised that when he met him the day before, before finding out he was the man who had in fact written the works of William Shakespeare, and such knowledge was now clearly playing to Jack’s disadvantage. Here he was, walking out of Whitehall Palace scarcely twenty-fours after having accidentally met him by the lake in St James’s Park. He had been half naked, as usual. They had started a conversation, but they hadn’t been talking for long before he was summoned by one of the Queen’s servants. On top of all that, the Queen had happened to cancel each and every single one of her duties for the day.

Connecting all those events was something that someone with the ability to put two and two together could have done easily. Any ordinary human could have easily jumped to the right conclusion. And Edward de Vere, he had found out, happened to be a genius.
“Good morning, sir,” said Jack with a bow when he was just a few metres away from the Earl of Oxford.

The newcomer stopped right in front of him and bowed as well, but when he finally spoke, Jack could tell he’d rather had not and that he was determined to let him know.

“The unparalleled education I received as a child, sir, leaves me no choice but to wish you a good morning in return. And yet I must confess I feel extremely pleased to see that you taking your leave this very instant. I presume Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth I shall have a few minutes of her time to spare for her subjects today, and that she shall most assuredly be no longer indisposed?”

“Well, I wouldn’t be so sure about that, sir,” replied Jack, grinning.

“That was a rhetorical question, sir,” Edward replied, not wanting to hold his anger back anymore, “so it was never meant to be graced with a reply. Good day to you, Lord Consort-Would-Be. I have no words to waste on conversation with opportunists.”

“Oh, this is just too good to be true!” an enthusiastic Jack said. “William Shakespeare has actually run out of words when talking to me? Oh, wow! Wait till I tell my friends!”

Jack’s amusement could be read all over his face, but so could Edward’s disbelief and rage. However, he didn’t give the astonished man any time to react after admitting that he knew his secret. He simply got close to him, put his hands on his shoulders, and kissed him fiercely.

Jack had been expected Edward to reject him, maybe even to punch him out of pride and fury, but he hadn’t cared. What truly happened, however, was that Edward put his hands on Jack’s head and pulled it towards his, the way Lady Caroline had done not long before, thus allowing his kiss to get deeper and participating in it with anxious desire.

Unfortunately for the former Time Agent and the secret genius playwright, an actual conversation concerning the importance and significance of such a mutually burning experience would have to wait until much later. An unexpected flashing white light brought their rapture to an end, especially when they saw it materialise into a real human being.

“Wow, Captain, you don’t waste any time, do you?” they both heard a female voice say.

Technically, they had already stopped kissing, but Jack and Edward still had not separated their mouths, so they kept facing each other while slightly moving both their heads to the side, foreheads glued, an eye wide open, the other completely shut. It was only when Jack recognised the person in front of them that he finally separated his mouth from the Earl of Oxford’s.

Under the circumstances, there was only one question that could possibly be asked.

“Miss Clara Oswald,” he said, sounding genuinely surprised, “what on earth are you doing here?”
As usual, a big big hug to my dear beta NoPondInTheForest :-D

It was completely dark by the time the same guards that had arrested Clara by command of Robert Cecil and escorted her out of Old St Paul’s Church locked her up in the Tower of London.

They had not been particularly kind to her, neither had she been as stupid as to expect them to be, but neither could she have imagined that they would say their goodbyes the way they did – by violently throwing her inside a dungeon. During her slow-motion descent, she even had time to make the decision of not letting those men leave without hearing one or maybe two really very rude words coming out of her mouth. Unfortunately, the impact of her forehead against the floor was such a violent one that she lost consciousness afterwards.

*****

She ignored how long she had remained unconscious when, one at a time, her senses started to come back slowly. However, she refused to let them take control over her mind or her body. Not yet. Not quite yet.

There was, in fact, something strangely comforting about the cold stone floor.

The vision that her subconscious mind had created was having a trance-inducing effect on her. A bright glow, orange and yellow, like a fiery sunset, was painted in her mind’s eye and shining all around her, keeping her warm and making her feel safe, taken care of, and loved. She could even feel a delightful sense of warmth which somehow seemed to be emanating from the stone underneath her.

“S’alright now,” an unexpected voice suddenly said. “Ya just need some rest.”

Had that been her mother’s talking?

She wouldn’t open her eyes, just in case, knowing that for as long as she kept them closed she would be able to see her as vividly as anything or anyone she had ever seen in her waking hours, looking beautiful and radiant, while a calming and incandescent amber-coloured gleam bathed every inch of her.

*****

When Clara finally opened her eyes she found out that she was not lying on the floor anymore, but comfortably resting in a four-poster bed. As she tried to sit up to take in the dark and large room that had just become her cell, she instinctively took a hand to her forehead and noticed there was a bump right where her head had touched the ground – and a rather painful one.

“Ouch!” she shouted, closing her eyes in pain.
It was then when the unforeseen voice of the woman she had mistaken for her mother became audible again.

“S’okay, you’re fine. Must hurt, I guess, but it’s just a bump.”

A startled Clara who had definitely not been expecting anyone to speak at all turned to take a look at the other woman in the room, but she couldn’t see much. The moonlight entering through the window right opposite left little else than a shadow to be seen.

“Ya want some water?”

The woman was sitting on the bed right next to her, but the room was so dimly lit that Clara found herself unable to study her features. The tone of her voice, however, had made it obvious that she was a very young girl, perhaps in her late teens or early twenties. It was also easy to realise she was extremely thin – and unhealthily so. Her long fair hair was dishevelled and dirty, and she was wearing a long white gown which was even dirtier.

“No, thanks. I’m fine…” Understanding that her own face was being made visible by the same moonlight that was preventing her from seeing her companion’s, Clara took her hand off her forehead and gave the girl a shy but grateful smile. “This is the Tower of London, right?” she asked, not really sure why, since she already knew the answer.

“Yeah. Doesn’t seem so when ya see massive beds in the cells, does it? It’s quite something, really. Ya’d never think they’d want to make anyone feel comfortable in ‘ere.”

“How long have you been here?” Clara asked.

“About a month or so? I don’t really know.”

“But this is… Not right,” Clara said, a bit confused. “You shouldn’t be here at all.”

(Of course I shouldn’t, an’ I bet neither should you,” the girl replied, now taking a hand to her mouth and starting to bite her thumb.

“I really mean it! Don’t you know?” Clara asked with wide-open eyes. “Everywhere you go, it’s being said there are no prisoners in the Tower anymore. That they’ve been… Disappearing.” She stopped at this point, thinking that she was probably scaring the girl with her words. However, as the girl didn’t show any signs of fear, she went on. “It’s all people will talk about in the streets, so how come you can still be here? Who are you?”

“Who am I?” the now suddenly upset young girl asked with a frown. “Guess I might as well ask, who are ya?”

She had a temper then. Good.

“Have you ever met the Queen, or are you in any way related to her?” Clara asked.

“What kind of question is that? Course not! Why would I be?” the girl said, the surprise in her voice clearly showing how much she had not expected that question.

“And have you ever met a man called the Doctor?” Clara asked then.

“Doctor who?” the girl replied with even greater surprise.
“Nothing. Just the Doctor.”

“Nop. ‘fraid I haven’t. You’re talking nonsense, ya know that?” The girl suddenly became silent, and as Clara sensed some hesitation in her, she put a hand on her shoulder to try to make her feel at ease. “But you’re right about one thing, I guess.”

It had long been glaringly obvious, by the time the girl said those words, that she belonged in that time and place exactly as much as Clara herself did, but she just wouldn’t say it. And yet, the idea of pushing her in order to find out more didn’t even cross Clara’s mind. After all, the Doctor and her had often met other time travellers in their adventures.

“Okay, fair enough!” said Clara then. “I don’t need to know who you are, and believe me, who I am is not important either. But we are together now, right? That’s what really matters. You can trust me, okay? You can tell me everything. I have friends who can help! They’ll get us out of here and we’ll be fine, but you must tell me everything you know or anything you may have seen.”

“Well, so as ya know, I don’t know a thing and I haven’t seen anything. But I’ve noticed…” the girl added, licking her dried lips before she went on. “The silence, I guess. I’ve noticed the silence.” She got up from the bed and sauntered towards the window. Looking up at the moon, she continued to talk. “It’d be impossible not to notice that. When I got ‘ere, I’d hear people screaming and crying, day’n’night, for days on end… Then one day all the noise stopped. It didn’t take long to understand what was going on.”

“And what was it?” asked Clara, holding her breath.

“That everyone was bein’ taken away to be questioned and then never came back.” she replied, raising her eyebrows as she marked the word ‘questioned’ to make it absolutely clear that it was a euphemism for ‘tortured’.

Not only did she have a temper. She was also really clever.

“So you’ve been here while all this has been going on, right? And have you ever noticed anything… I don’t know how to put this… Maybe strange, or uncommon?”

“If what ya mean is something really weird, then the answer is… Like all the time!”

“Then tell me!” shouted Clara.

“Forget it, you wouldn’t believe it.”

“Believe me, I really would.”

“This is crazy, alright?” the girl said, shaking her head and crossing her arms over her chest as she turned from the window to look at Clara. “I’ve got nothing else to say. I’m sorry! All I know is that I wanna go home with my mum. I don’t even know why I’m ‘ere!”

“I’m sorry about that, I really am!” said Clara, pushing the coverlet away from her and turning to the side of the bed where the girl had been sitting minutes before. “I don’t want to put you under any kind of pressure, I promise! I’m just trying to understand... Why would everyone disappear, except you?”

“Don’t ‘ave a clue,” the girl replied before she instinctively took her hand to her mouth one more time and started to bite her thumb again.

The moonlight was now betraying the shape of the girl’s body underneath her worn-out and filthy
gown. Much to Clara’s surprise, she was even thinner than she had guessed at first, but it was exactly in that moment when an unpleasant smell reached her nostrils, which spread as she inhaled. She then turned her head to a corner next to the door, and suddenly it all made sense. There was a bowl of food that had been left untouched in the corner, as well as a half-empty glass – the evidence to confirm her suspicion that the girl hadn’t been eating much lately, if anything at all.

The girl was still standing by the window in the most absolute silence. Taking her thumb away from her mouth, her right hand started to play with her hair while the tips of her left-hand fingers kept delicately touching the wall to the left of the window frame, her eyes fixed on the particular spot her fingertips were brushing.

“I dunno,” she suddenly added. “Maybe it’s just that my turn to be questioned hasn’t come yet.”

Clara had always been good at reading between the lines, and if the girl had previously left no doubt about what the implications of being questioned were, the tone in which she had uttered those last words had made it perfectly clear how she was also well aware of the fact that, regardless of whatever might be going on in the Tower for the time being, torture was often followed by execution. Still, not for a single second did her voice show any trace of fear.

Clara herself was probably more scared than the girl, as her mind couldn’t help but picture several grotesque varieties of Elizabethan executions she had seen in films.

“Well,” she added with determination, quickly trying to lock those images in the most inaccessible corner of her brain, “that being the case, I suggest the two of us get out of here before it does. And then once we get out we’ll decide whether we want to stick around and find out what the hell’s really going on here, okay?”

“Sounds good,” the girl replied, a discreet smile suddenly on her lips. “But getting out of ‘ere first sounds even better. How we gonna do it? Are your friends coming soon?”

“Well, not really,” said Clara. “To be honest, I wouldn’t count on them just yet. Last time I saw them they were so busy playing their idiotic ‘but-I’m-cleverer-than-you-are’ game that I wouldn’t be surprised if they still hadn’t noticed I’m gone.”

“Oh,” said the girl, whose initial excitement cooled down all of a sudden. “Some help, huh?”

“Don’t worry about that. We’ll manage.” Clara took a look around her then to study the room. “There must be a way out! This looks more like a bedroom than a cell, doesn’t it? There must be some other door somewhere...”

“There’s nothing,” the girl said categorically. “‘How do you think I’ve been spending my time ‘ere? I’ve looked and looked, and there’s nothing. Well, maybe there’s one thing. Just one little thing. Come ‘ere and take a look,” she added bitterly, pointing at the spot of the wall she had seemed to be caressing just moments before.

Clara finally got out of the bed and walked towards the window, and stopping between the girl and the wall, she turned round and looked at the place the stranger’s forefinger was still pointing at. Then she spent a few seconds silently observing the very familiar name carved in the stone wall.

Anne Boleyn’s.

And then, realisation finally struck her. She and that girl were nothing more than prisoners in a dungeon after all, and the carving that had been keeping them company seemed to be indicating there was no chance of escaping at all.
“Oh,” she whispered.

“You’re telling me,” the girl added. “See? There’s no way out. There’s just that door behind me. And I seriously doubt it’ll be unlocked.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised,” said Clara.

She had meant it as a joke at first, but soon enough she realised the implications of her words. She suddenly remembered the looks on the three Doctors’ faces when she came to their rescue after teleporting from twenty-first century UNIT HQ to the sixteenth century Tower, then found them making calculations with their sonic screwdrivers with the purpose of unlocking a door that had never been locked in the first place.

A big smile parted the lips that had been tightly pressed until then.

“Oi, what’s happened?” the girl asked as she noticed the change in Clara’s expression.

But Clara wasn’t listening. She had turned her back on her and, going with her gut feeling, was now walking towards the door, absolutely certain that, if she only just pulled, it would open.

She felt really disappointed when she found out it would not.

“Well, this time the Queen’s not interested in what we might do upon escaping,” she said angrily.

And then, out the blue, realisation struck her for a third time.

She froze for a moment, unable to understand how such a recent and decisive memory had not crossed her mind until then, and when she eventually rolled up the left sleeve of her tunic, her big round eyes became even bigger as they saw the vortex manipulator she had taken from the Black Archive. Strangely enough, she had completely forgotten that in between teleporting to sixteenth century London and finding the Doctors inside the Tower, she had put it on and was still wearing it, but what was even stranger was the fact that she could still remember the code that would activate it and take her to the Doctors.

1-7-1-6-2-3-1-1-6-3.

Her exhilaration at discovering that the key to her freedom had been attached to her wrist all this time was soon tainted by the thought that it would only set one of them free. Suddenly, she felt sick and furious, probably the same way the Doctor felt – though he would never let it show – every time a difficult decision had to be made, and much to her regret, this time the responsibility of making one was falling upon her, which made the pain in her stomach gradually become more unbearable.

But how could she possibly abandon that poor girl to her own fate? Getting out of there was one thing – she obviously needed to get back to the Doctors. But not coming back for her? That was absolutely out of the question!

Clenching her fists, Clara turned and walked towards the girl, who was looking at her with inquisitive eyes.

The dark blanket of the night was finally dissolving into the atmosphere, and with the help of a timid ray of sun, the two women could finally take a proper look at each other’s faces for the first time since they had been brought together inside that room. Had any of them wanted to share their impressions with the other, they would have found them to be quite similar. They both thought the other to look brave and trustworthy. However, where Clara looked hopeful, there other girl looked
terribly hopeless.

“Look,” Clara finally said, “I’ve just found a way out. Problem is, I can’t take you with me, or at least, not yet.”

“Ya kiddin’ me?” the girl asked, her jaw dropping. “I’ve been looking for a way out for weeks. Looking in vain, ‘cause I never found one, now you’ve been awake in ‘ere for ten minutes and you’re tellin’ me you’ve found it?”

“Trust me, I really have!”

“Yeah, ya really have, but not for me! And we were in this together, didn’t ya say so?” the girl added as she turned her back on Clara, deception clear in her voice.

“Listen to me!” said Clara as she grabbed the girl by the arm before she could get out of her reach. “I’m being serious, okay? Why should I lie? I said I’m coming back for you, and I will.”

“And why would ya do that?” she asked bitterly, a tear falling from her eye. “Ya don’t even know me! Why would ya care for me when nobody else does?”

“Because I do!” shouted Clara, grabbing the girl by the shoulders and locking eyes with her. “Because I care, that’s why! My name’s Clara Oswald, and I swear that, before anything happens to you, I’ll come back! I’ll get you out of here and then I’ll take you home to your mom. I’m giving you my word! All right?”

The girl was now looking down. Maybe it was just wishful thinking, but Clara’s words had sounded so true and so sincere, that all she could do was believe she’d really come back.

“Don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine,” she said, giving her a delicate but reassuring smile. “Off you go now. I’ll be alright.”

The girl was a bit taller than she was, so Clara had to stand on her toes to plant a kiss on her forehead. It was the kind of kiss that a mother would give to her child, to make them see there was absolutely nothing they wouldn’t do just to protect them.

“This is not goodbye, okay?” she said as she brushed away the tear on the girl’s cheek with her thumb. “I’ll see you again soon, I promise. I’ll be back when this is all over and then I’ll take you away from here.”

And having said that, Clara turned away from her and rolled her sleeve up one more time, then pulled up the flap of the vortex manipulator and carefully started to introduce the activation code.

1-7-1-6-2-3-1…

Come to think of it, she had no idea where she could possibly materialise once she had vanished from the Tower, but there was nothing she could do about it, except hope that it would be by the Doctor’s side.

…1-6-3.

She turned her head to take a final look at the girl before pressing one last and crucial button.

‘I’ll come back for you, okay? You remember that!”

“Thank you,” the girl said as she smiled again, and ignoring that Clara was about to disappear, she
started to say something else. “Clara, listen! Just one thing before you g…”

But the moment the girl called her by her name for the very first time, Clara pressed the last button, and so she dematerialised within a flash of white light before the surprised girl had the chance to say to her that her name was Rose.
A Tale of Two Doctors

In his nine hundred and six years of existence, there had been many times when the Doctor had been on his own. Not by choice, really. Hardly ever by choice. In all probability, just lately, since the day he had to say goodbye to his dear friend Donna Noble. The turn of events always seemed to turn the mighty Time Lord into the lonely god, no matter how badly he might not want to be alone.

Not that his life was a bad one after all. When each of his days travelling in time and space was still unpredictable and full of adventure and excitement after nearly a millennia, how could he possibly not love his life? But still, Doctor Chinny and Clara Oswald seemed to have come just to remind him that travelling alone had made of him a mere wanderer.

That it was ‘better with two’.

Those three words had been reverberating in his brain since the day he had first heard them. There had even been a time when he had been such a starry-eyed dreamer that he had let himself believe not only that the magic of ‘being two’ could actually exist, but also that it could be bestowed upon him. For what seemed to be the tiniest fraction of his long and wondrous existence, he allowed himself to taste what the word ‘two’ only rarely came to mean and how life-changing that meaning could be. He had treasured it as much as he had always treasured the universe and every galaxy and star and planet and creature in it. He had wanted to keep it close to him, and sing to it, and share his greatest joys and also his darkest hours with it. But most of all, he had wanted to protect it and to take care of it. Knowing only too well that the word ‘forever’ had never been written in the rules of the game he’d been long playing, he had eventually reconciled himself to the thought that he would cherish the word ‘two’ just for as long as he possibly could. He had somehow taken for granted that it would be ‘long enough’.

Never had time and space felt any crueller, or proved him to be more wrong.

One day, just like that, he found himself alone again. Then came Martha and Donna, and with them, the word ‘two’ became what it had always been, a synonym for friendship and companionship. But it never regained that magical quality again. At least, not to this version of him.

He wasn’t so sure, however, that he could say the same thing about his future self at all. He had seen the way the other Doctor looked at Clara and the way Clara looked at him, and something about their sheer happiness at just being together had made him feel he was looking at his very own pinstriped self, back on the days before a void in space had most unexpectedly put a blood-chilling white wall ‘forever’ between him and Rose.

For some reason he couldn’t quite grasp, the vision of the new Doctor and his current companion had unpredictably filled him with hope.

“Oi! Sandshoes! Is that you?” Bow-tied Him’s voice suddenly called calling in the distance, thus waking him up from his reverie.
“Are you honestly expecting me to answer such stupid question? Who else could it be?” He sounded annoyed when he answered the Eleventh Doctor’s question with two new other questions but, curiously enough, he was grinning from ear to ear as he got up from his seat on one of the steps of the unpopular spiral staircase that had led them to the secret passages underneath the city.

Why should he insist on not admitting to himself that he just hated being alone? And since he was probably destined to forget all this the same way he had lost all of his memories of how he had recently contributed to saving Gallifrey, Chinny would never know the relief he had felt when his call eventually put an end to the wanderings not only of his mind, but also of his sonic screwdriver, whose blue light had been pointing for ages at the rose carved in the central keystone at the top of one of the archways. “Any luck?”

“No!” the Eleventh Doctor shouted from afar. “And judging by your question, I guess you didn’t find her either!”

“No!” the Eleventh Doctor shouted from afar. “And judging by your question, I guess you didn’t find her either!”

“You’re right! I didn’t!” he shouted back as he got up from the staircase.

The Tenth Doctor heard his successor’s footsteps become quicker and gradually louder until he finally emerged out of the archway crowned by the boat and the cross. The green light of his own sonic screwdriver was shining up on his face. It might have been an optical illusion, but the Tenth Doctor would have sworn that Future Him looked quite blue around the gills.

“Are you okay?” he asked him with concern. “As far as I know, it’s still me who’s regenerating when this is all over.”

“No, I’m not,” the older Time Lord replied angrily, “and I won’t be okay until we find her, so let’s get into that archway over there, shall we?”

“Be my guest,” replied the Tenth Doctor nonchalantly, leading the way with his hand and letting him go through that last archway first. In spite of his tone, he knew the other Doctor’s concern to be genuine, and after taking just a few steps along the only tunnel they’d so far left unexplored, he spoke again, determined to make him feel better. “Don’t worry so much about her. She’s a clever girl, Chinny. She’ll be fine.”

“They’re always clever, aren’t they?” the other Doctor replied, coolly. “Unfortunately, clever girls aren’t always fine once we’ve bumped into their lives, Sandshoes. You of all people should know that.”

The Tenth Doctor stopped on his tracks, and when the Eleventh Doctor noticed that he could no longer hear any footsteps behind him, it hit him how this time, he had put his very own foot in it. He came to a halt and turned to the other Time Lord, then spoke.

“I’m sorry,” he said. Looking into his predecessor’s eyes, he hated being the cause of all the rage and fury he was seeing in them.

“Don’t you dare say something like that to me ever again, you hear me?” replied the Oncoming Storm as he heatedly stepped towards him.

“I’ve said I’m sorry,” he replied, feeling the other Doctor’s agitated breath upon his face. “I’m worried sick about Clara. I’m sure you can understand that.”

The two Doctors stood still for a while, just looking at one another as blue and green flashes of light bathed their faces. Their body language had at first been menacing, but gradually it became conciliatory, until eventually the both started to chill out.
“I’m sorry too,” said the Tenth Doctor. “I wish I didn’t know there’s always a chance for things to go terribly wrong. I was just trying to… You know. Be of some comfort.”

“And I thank you,” replied the Eleventh Doctor, a shy smile curling up his lips. “I know you meant well, and I know you know how worried I am. But that’s no excuse, Sandshoes. I shouldn’t have said what I said. I’m sorry. I’m really terribly sor... Oh no, for goodness’ sake… Did you hear that? All of a sudden, I’m being apologetic! I’m turning back into you again!” he protested, raising his eyebrows before he opened his mouth wide to exclaim, with a scornful look, “Ouch!”

“’Ouch’?” asked the Tenth Doctor with a frown. “Why ‘ouch’? Was it really that bad, being me?”

“Well, come to think of it, being you actually wasn’t. But being some other guys before you… Ouch indeed! No sense of fashion at all!”

The Tenth Doctor’s loud snort happened to have the effect his previous words of comfort had not, as it made the other Doctor smile and momentarily calm down. The two Time Lords kept smiling shyly for a moment before they resumed their march along the quill tunnel, their sonic screwdrivers flashing their lights in all possible directions.

“The first time I met her, she died,” said the Eleventh Doctor, unable to find a reason why he shouldn’t share his present worries with his past self. “On a previous occasion I didn’t actually get to meet her, but she also died. She was different back then. It wasn’t really her, and dying to save me was what she was supposed to do. It’s... complicated. Now she’s the real thing and she might be in real danger and I’m not there to protect her. Of course she’s clever. Aren’t they all clever? But she’s not infallible. If she died again... That would be it. She’d never return.”

The Tenth Doctor had not made a single sound in the interim, not because he had nothing to say, but rather because he was, as a matter of fact, incapable of speaking. Too many memories had suddenly come back to disturb him.

“Listen to me,” he finally managed to say, stopping in his tracks again and forcing the other Doctor to do the same, “and now I’m not trying to comfort you – now I’m making you a promise. We’ll find her. Even if we have to stay here forever and a day, we’re not leaving without her.”

Those words had sounded everything but deceptive or dishonest. And yet, the Eleventh Doctor didn’t believe for a single second that his past self had really meant them.

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Sandshoes,” he said, blinding the Tenth Doctor as he put his sonic screwdriver directly in front of his face.

“What makes you think I can’t keep that promise?” the Tenth Doctor asked offhandedly.

“That you’ve never broken the rules,” replied the Eleventh Doctor, locking eyes with him.

“I’m sorry?” asked the Tenth Doctor, confused.

“You never break the rules, Sandshoes,” his future self said calmly. “I sometimes bend them a little. Other times, more than just a little. And more often than not, I don’t observe them in the slightest.”

“Your point being?” a disconcerted Tenth Doctor asked.

“My point being, staying here forever sounds pretty much like breaking the rules to me. Staying here forever is what I would do, but not what you’d do.”
“Well, maybe just this once, I might just want to break some rules,” answered the Tenth Doctor, as he reached for his neck and nervously started to rub its back.

“And why would you go such lengths for me when you never did for you?”

And with that last question, the Tenth Doctor’s bewilderment dissipated. Now how finally understood. That hadn’t really been a question. That had been more like a bullet going straight into each of his shattered hearts.

“Well, look at me!” he said, opening his arms as he looked down. “I was regenerating when you came and the process was interrupted. I’d say the only reason why I’m still here is because you’ve bought me some more time. And you know what? I’m loving it. I’m loving this extra time I’m getting just because you broke the rules first! So right now – and I hope the universe won’t mind too much about it – I couldn’t care any less about the bloody rules.”

“Nice try, Sandshoes,” said the Eleventh Doctor, “but the fact that you’re being so elusive won’t stop me from asking the one question that you don’t want me to ask.”

“And what question could that be?” asked the Tenth Doctor with disdain.

“Why did you do it?” his future self asked him angrily as could be.

“Why did I do what?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about, Sandshoes,” he said, clenching his teeth.

“I’ve lived for nine centuries and I’ve done an awful lot of things, Chinny, so what on earth do you mean?”

“To her,” slowly said the Eleventh Doctor, shutting his eyes. “Why did you do what you did to her?”

The Tenth Doctor had already known the real question long before it was asked, but that knowledge had not prevented his hearts from starting to beat faster the moment it was said out loud.

“How could you forget why I did that?” he almost whispered. “How could you forget that, of all things?”

“You know what, Sandshoes?” cut in the Eleventh Doctor. “It’s great to be me, I love being me! But it was also great to be you. I may just have a complaint or two about those days... I particularly remember one when I felt I was in one of those cartoon films where an angel and a demon will pop out of a character’s head and try to talk them into making the decision each of them wants them to make. In fact, we could’ve staged it at the time, as a certain humany Doctor happened to be available, but did we ask him what he thought? No we didn’t! We just did things our way, like we always do, right? So now that we finally have a chance… You’ll be the angel, I’ll be the demon.”

He came to a stop, and turning to face prior him, he gritted his teeth as he went on. “Why-on-earth-did-you-do-it? And the answer better be convincing!”

And then, there was a long silence. When, eventually, the Tenth Doctor spoke, his voice was full of misery and guilt.

“You know why I did it.”

“No I don’t,” the Eleventh Doctor promptly replied. “I may have done at the time, but this new Doctor can’t understand. He needs to be told again or he won’t stand a chance.”
“What else could I have done?” the Tenth Doctor shouted, squinting. “Huh? Tell me, Chinny! What else was there for me to do?”

“Well, lots of things!” replied the Eleventh Doctor, his eyes opening wide.

“I would’ve lost her again in the end,” replied the other Doctor, trying to fight the tears that were now welling in his eyes.

“But you don’t know that!” the older Doctor told him, raising his voice.

“Isn’t it always the same, Chinny?” the Tenth Doctor asked as he turned to a wall. He lifted his arms and let his hands rest on the cold stone as he looked down, his gaze sinking into the darkness. “Didn’t we lose Martha or Donna? Did you not lose your other friends? Do you seriously believe you will never lose Clara?”

“No if I have anything to say about it,” replied the Eleventh Doctor, confident as he had never been before. “And you didn’t lose Rose, Sandshoes – you locked her up and threw out the key.”

“Don’t I know!” sobbed the Tenth Doctor.

“You must have hurt her,” the Eleventh Doctor muttered.

“That’s the thought that keeps running through my head every single day since then. I can only hope that, in time, she’ll understand why I did it.”

“I would never do to Clara what you did to her.”

“Don’t use regeneration as an excuse to detach your actions from mine, Chinny,” said the Tenth Doctor, angrily, as he turned to him. “Deep down inside, you and I… we’re no different.”

“Maybe not,” said the Eleventh Doctor, “but at least I hope I won’t repeat the mistakes of my past.”

And then, they continued their exploration of that tunnel in the deadliest silence.
Of Playwrights and Time Travellers

Chapter Notes

Beta-ed by the amazing NoPondInTheForest, but as apparently I can never stop editing, all mistakes are mine, not hers! This was never meant to be a crossover, but I can't deny that the character of Edward de Vere is highly influenced by Roland Emmerich's fantastic film "Anonymous". Thank you guys for all the kudos! Hope you won't be disappointed.

"And why didn't you bring that girl with you?" Jack asked Clara.

"How was I supposed to do that?" she asked back, not sure whether to believe she could actually have released that poor girl from the Tower or to think she had been a perfect idiot.

"Doc never taught you to use a vortex manipulator?"

"Never had one before, and since I've had one, he's been rather busy."

"Bet he has! Anyway, I don't think he'd have explained how to use it, even if he'd had the time. Whenever I meet him he always deactivates mine," Jack complained.

"And why would he do that?" asked Clara with a frown.

"Why would he do that? Just out of pure vanity! He's not the only one who can travel in space and time, but he doesn't like being reminded 'cause he doesn't feel as special as he likes to think he is. Plus, of course, how can a vortex manipulator compete with the TARDIS?" Jack shut his eyes and exhaled before he went on. "Okay, he might have a point there, but that little thing that's wrapped around your wrist has saved the day on more than one occasion, and he knows it."

"Not today I'm afraid, Captain," said Clara. "The first time I used it, right after someone showed it to me in The Black Archive, it practically took me directly to the Doctors."

"I wouldn't say its choice of destination has been entirely random this time, Clara," Jack told her. "UNIT probably stole it from me, so it's basically come home to daddy."

"And could that be the only reason why it's led me to you instead of them?"

"Well, it might also have brought us together because of the undeniable attraction between us, Miss Oswald," answered Jack, giving her one of his seductive looks and one of his usual smiles.

In contrast, the look Clara gave Captain Jack Harkness made it absolutely clear that she was definitely not in the mood for jokes.

"What code did you use before you teleported here?" he asked, his flirtatious efforts now put on the raising of an eyebrow.

"If the Doctor doesn't let you use that thing and keeps deactivating it whenever the two of you bump into each other, what makes you think I'd give you that code?" she replied, an air of defiance about her.
"I can see you don't trust me, Miss Oswald," said Jack as he got a few steps closer to Clara, "and I can't blame you for that! The Doctor didn't trust me when we first met either, but then he changed me. And he did it for the best. That's what he does to people, and you know it. I won't deny I've done things that I'm not proud of, Clara, but I can give you a few reasons why you should trust me right now. First one is I'm good! And I mean very good. Want another one? I'm definitely on your side. And finally, in case you still think you might need another, I'm not sure if you've already noticed, but right now, I happen to be everything you've got."

"You might be everything I've got at the moment, Captain, but I'm still not giving you the code."

"Then answer this simple question. Was there a 4 somewhere? Or maybe – just maybe – a 9?"

"No... There... Wasn't...," she answered slowly as she took an instant to mentally go through it.

"I guessed so," Jack replied grimacing.

"And what exactly did you guess, Captain?" asked Clara, crossing her arms over her chest.

"There's this code – I'll call it 'indigo' – which my dear friend Martha Jones once gave me. Not only did it set that thing running, it also led me directly to the Doctor, and I deeply regret to inform you, Miss Oswald, that's not the code you have!"

"We'll find the Doctors, Captain! Never mind the code! Now please tell me, could I really have taken that girl with me?"

"Yes, you could!"

"Shit!"

"If only she had touched the strap or the flap, the two of you would've teleported out of the Tower together."

"And could I use it to go back to the Tower and get her out of there before we go looking for the Doctors?"

"I can't see why not," Jack replied. "Want me to go with you?"

"I've you've got nothing better to do," said Clara ironically.

"Actually, I do, but I guess it can wait. I'm sure Eddie here won't mind! He might even want to come with us! What do you think, Eddie?" he asked, turning to the other man who was wearing a Renaissance outfit. "Fancy a teleporting experience?"

The moment Clara Oswald had appeared, Edward de Vere had stepped behind her – at first, with the intention of admiring the face of the man whose kiss had let some sunshine get in through the countless cracks in his broken soul, making his tired heart pound with excitement like never before. Soon, however, the time travellers' conversation brought such twinkle to his eyes that it became unbelievably easy for Jack and Clara to predict his answer before he found the time to actually put it into words.

"By all the stars in heaven, indeed I would!"

But of course, he thought. He was supposed to be a genius, and how could a genius's answer ever have been any different?
Jack was briefly rejoicing in the natural yet powerful forces of human curiosity and thirst for knowledge and exploration when he was suddenly interrupted by Clara's simple yet sensible question.

"And who are you?" asked Clara in a tone of voice which hadn't sounded so much as the result of human curiosity or thirst for knowledge, but rather as a question the captain of a ship would ask a stowaway.

"Haven't really had time to introduce you two properly, have I?" Jack said ironically. Stepping towards Edward, he put a hand on his shoulder before he went on. "Miss Clara Oswald, this is Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford. Although…"

"I am, in fact, the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford, madam," Edward cut in. 

"...although he's usually referred to by the name 'William Shakespeare'."

There was a short but awkward silence before Clara spoke.

"What do you mean, William Shakespeare?" she asked with a frown.

"I guess I meant 'William Shakespeare' as in 'the greatest writer who ever lived'," he replied, "but I just didn't think it'd be necessary to state the obvious."

"People are seldom graced with the knowledge that this gentleman and you, my lady, are now in possession of," said Edward as he bowed. "Why such knowledge was revealed to you, sir, is something I absolutely ignore, but I find myself obliged to ask both of you to address this issue with the utmost discretion."

"No offence," said Clara, "Mr…"

"De Vere, my lady."

"De Vere, right! No offence, Mr de Vere, but how can we be sure you're telling the truth?"

"No offence, Miss Oswald," interrupted Jack, "but I don't think you know your mysterious girl in the Tower any better than you know this man, but even if you don't, for some reason, you trust her, and you are determined to go and help her and nothing in the universe can stop you. Am I right?"

"That girl was a prisoner, Captain," said Clara, raising her eyebrows, "and this man is not, and I might not really know any of them but neither do you! What matters is, she might never get out of the Tower if we don't go there and help her, whereas he's a free man who could be one the Queen's most faithful servants for all we know."

"Oh! Then how terribly clever of us to be having this conversation right in front of him!" Jack exclaimed with sarcasm.

"Sir, madam," Edward cut in, "I can assure you both that I am not one of Her Majesty's spies."

"Hang on," said a now incredulous Clara. "I said 'servants', but you said 'spies'. Does Queen Elizabeth actually have spies?"

"Of course she does, my lady," Edward replied. "Any powerful King or Queen must always have spies. It would be extremely dangerous and unwise if they did not. They need eyes and ears at foreign courts."
Clara stayed silent for a moment, a faint smile on her lips.

"Basic knowledge of foreign politics then… Not bad for starters, sir, but you'll have to do better than that."

"I beg your pardon?"

"We have a friend, the Captain and I…"

"Are you referring to Lord Boeshane, my lady?"

"Yes! Lord Boeshane! Lord Boeshane and I, we have this friend," she went on, "who said he'd once met a William Shakespeare who, oddly enough, was incapable of finishing his own verses. Our friend thought he had simply not written those plays yet but, come to think of it, now that you're here…”

"Now that he's here you can see as plainly as I do that that man was definitely not the real thing," said Jack, sounding really cross.

"I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt, sir," said Clara, her eyes darting from Edward to Jack and back to Edward again. "If you're telling the truth, if that man our friend met wasn't the great playwright, I'm afraid you'll have to prove it."

She had asked that last question taking a few steps closer to him, an air of defiance about her.

"If you wish me to prove it, my lady," Edward said in a self-assured tone while his eyes shone with bewilderment, "then prove it I shall, especially if by doing so I shall be rewarded with the honour of being allowed to partake in those events whose fascinating nature lies beyond my knowledge of this world and the stars around it."

"Good!" said Clara, taking a few steps closer to him. "This is what we'll do – you must finish each of the sentences I'm going to say, alright?"

"Oh, for goodness' sake…” Captain Jack Harkness protested right behind them.

"I shall do my best to excel, my lady," Edward gladly answered with another bow.

"Okay, here comes the first!" said Clara, who couldn't help but feel a glimmer of excitement because of what she was about to do. "If we shadows have offended…"

"…Think but this (and all is mended), that you have but slumber'd here, while these visions did appear…"

"Play?" Clara asked.

"A Midsummer Night's Dream, my lady."

"Okay," she said nodding, "here's another one. Stars, hide your fires…"

"Let no light see my dark and deep desires. That is a verse from Macbeth, my lady, although I am rather surprised that you should have had a chance to learn it, as I happen to have just finished that play. It has not even been sent to the presumed author yet."

"I can be very resourceful," she said. But far from being contented with the results she'd got by means of this little experiment of hers so far, Clara still wanted to push things a little bit further. It had suddenly hit her that the verses she had recited had one very important thing in common. Not
only had they been lines from two of Shakespeare's greatest plays – they were all really well-known and extremely popular, at least in the twenty-first century, and for that very reason she now had the feeling they had been far from being good choices for their Shakespearean challenge. She couldn't keep on quoting Macbeth any longer, and Hamlet was definitely out of the question. She'd need something that wasn't as popular, and if possible, something infinitely darker.

It was at that point that memories of her childhood came to her mind. She had often been around playing with her toys or reading some of her fairy tales books while her grandparents had been watching one or other of Laurence Olivier's Shakespeare adaptations, and she could still remember how 9-year-old Clara Oswald had felt absolutely terrified when she accidentally learned the true facts regarding the mysterious disappearances behind Shakespeare's retelling of the story of one of history's greatest villains – King Richard III, the man who had killed the two young sons of his recently deceased brother so that he could become king.

"What about this one?" she asked. "Compare dead happiness with living woe…"

Edward smiled almost imperceptibly before he took over.

"Think that thy babes were sweeter than they were, and he that slew them fouler than he is. That's Richard III, my lady."

"I learned those lines by heart when I was just a child, sir, and I still remember them."

"Of course you remember them, my lady," Edward said softly. "For how could a child even start to conceive the thought that an ordinary human being could kill other children?"

Jack looked down in silence.

"Okay, here's the last one," Clara said determinedly. "Journeys end in lovers meeting…"

She finished that line and gave Edward de Vere a moment to think, but as he said nothing, she completed that verse for him. "Every wise man's son doth know…"

Still, Edward didn't say a word.

"Feste?" Clara asked frowning. "From Twelfth Night?"

"My dear madam," he said, "if making you believe that I am the author of the literary work people assume to have been written by a William Shakespeare depends upon my recognition of those verses you have recited," said Edward calmly, "then perhaps I should desist, my lady, since this man standing right before you has never written them."

It had been a trap, of course. The fact that she had unexpectedly remembered that Twelfth Night had been published in 1602 – tricks of the trade – and the suspicion that Edward might just not have written those verses yet had suddenly made them the most appealing, and Edward, she had to admit, hadn't disappointed her at all. The modesty the Earl of Oxford had made a show of in not falling into her trap made Clara start to believe that, even if he hadn't written those lines yet, one day, eventually, he would.

"Okay, so you might be the real Shakespeare after all, sir," she said, smiling at him.

"In truth, my lady, my name is Edward de Vere, and I am the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford. I would not, however, be speaking the truth if I attempted to dispute the otherwise undeniable fact that I have the honour and the shame of being the man who has most assuredly penned all the works attributed to the man called William Shakespeare."
"Why should you be ashamed of being the man who wrote those plays?" asked Clara, raising her eyebrows as she smirked.

"It is, I am afraid, a very long story, my lady, and not all of it is pleasant to recall," he answered, trying his best to pretend that his mood had not suddenly been darkened by the memories of a past which might have destroyed his life and his career as a playwright forever, but which had also been so full of bliss and delight that he had always refused to consign it to oblivion. Needless to say that, as far as Clara was concerned, he had not succeeded.

Looking at both Jack and Clara, Edward de Vere went on.

"Sir, madam, it is plainly perceptible that you are not, if I may say, of this world, and I am humbly honoured that my companionship has been accepted and I shall also be participating in those extraordinary undertakings you are here to be a part of. I have no objections to telling you the unfortunate story of Edward de Vere, in order to repay your kindness, but I also understand, judging by your conversation, that you do not let any more of your time go to waste. Did you not mention another lady who is at present in need of rescuing, my lady Clara?"

Clara smiled at Edward de Vere, her mind positively made up.

"The Tower, Captain," she said turning to Jack. "Let's go find that girl now."

Jack immediately took hold of Clara's left wrist, and pulling up the sleeve of her tunic, he lifted the flap of the vortex manipulator.

"The indigo code isn't really a code," Jack said. "You just need to make a couple of minor adjustments to this thing and then it will take you wherever it is you want to go." A quick look at his new friends' eyes left no trace of doubt that they were more than willing to go. "Ready?"

"Oh yes," replied Clara.

"Ready and waiting, sir," said Edward, who had just wrapped a hand around Clara's forearm close to her wrist. "And may I add, never have I been as willing to do anything in my entire life as I am this moment."

Jack felt so excited for the Earl of Oxford – who was probably going to live the greatest adventure of his whole life but still didn't know it – that he momentarily took his hand off the leather of the strap to squeeze Edward's long fingers. The moment he did so was also the moment Clara chose to press the final button on the vortex manipulator, and as Edward's own fingers were then curled around Jack's and not in touch with the leather anymore, it all ended up in disaster.

Jack and Edward teleported together to the same place, but Clara teleported to another.
Big big big thanks to my dear beta NoPondInTheForest and to you guys for all your kudos! I've taken some liberties as regards the uses of vortex manipulators, hope you won't mind too much!

Clara had closed her eyes in order not to get sick as the whirl of the time vortex started to push her whole body in all possible directions, but as soon as she felt that her two feet were on solid ground again, she opened them up.

“Oh, brilliant!” she muttered clenching her teeth when she realised that the familiar faces of the two men she had expected to find there with her were not to be seen at all. As a matter of fact, she wasn’t in the Tower of London either. Oddly enough, she was standing halfway along a white wall corridor inside what appeared to be someone’s very ordinary looking house. All along the corridor there were pictures hanging on both walls, but it was night and the lights were off, so she couldn’t take a proper look at them. What she could definitely tell was that the corridor opened up into a room, as the light of the full moon entering through the window had made part of it relatively visible. Clara slowly stepped into the room, her eyes curiously inspecting it as much as the limited lighting conditions would allow. There wasn’t much furniture in it, except for a couple of chairs and a round table, on top of which were countless gadgets – the sort of gadgets the Doctor would spend ages fidgeting with –, some radio equipment, a laptop, and what appeared to be not so much a microscope than a really very small telescope.

Getting close to the window, Clara pulled the blue curtain to the side and felt a soft breeze caress her face and the few parts of her skin that her tunic had never been meant to cover. When she looked up, she couldn’t hold back a loud gasp at the majestic sight of the towering building that she would never have imagined could have been there at all – Canary Wharf.

“Hang on,” she said with a frown, “am I back in the twenty-first century again?”

A shiver ran through her body the moment she felt a hand squeezing her shoulder. Paralysed by fear, she slowly turned around, and her heart almost burst with the most immense joy the moment she saw the Doctor – her Doctor – standing right in front of her.

“Clara!” he whispered, and to her, his voice sounded like that of someone who’d just seen a ghost, “what are you doing here?”

He seemed to be delighted to see her in spite of it all.

“Doctor!” she whispered back, instinctively holding his hand. “Is everything alright?”

Much to her surprise, the Doctor’s hand was shaking.

Her question didn’t seem to surprise the Doctor in the slightest. Even if the room was dark, he must have known that the tear falling down his cheek would be inevitably visible to her. A few seconds were spent in silence, the Doctor just staring deep into her eyes as he cupped her cheek and smiled softly. Something must have happened to him, Clara thought just seconds later, as it was plain as
day to see that he was feeling emotional. For a moment, she panicked, since the Doctor had hardly ever been emotional before. She was hoping for him to be able to put his thoughts into words and tell her about what had happened, but when he finally said something, he didn’t speak about those things at all.

“Yes it is,” he replied, his thumb caressing her chin as his eyes sparkled, his pupils dilating in the moonlight. “After a very long time, I think everything’s finally alright.”

There was another brief silence, during which time the Doctor squeezed Clara’s hand harder.

“Clara, you need to go,” he whispered softly again, concern now suddenly written all over his face. “I wish I could,” she lied, “but I don’t know how. I don’t even know how I ended up here. All I know is this thing definitely had something to do with it.”

She lifted her arm, and as the fabric of her tunic sleeve fell down onto her elbow, Jack’s vortex manipulator appeared right in front of the Doctor’s eyes. “I see,” he said. “Captain Jack was trying to help me teleport to …”

“Captain Jack? Are you with Captain Jack?” he suddenly asked quite alarmed, as the features that Clara had just moments before found sweet and adorable were transformed into a grimace of disgust. “Clara! What on earth are you doing with him? You can’t be with him! Oh, wait a minute… I think I’m having a déjà-vu!”

“Doctor, listen, I really shouldn’t be here,” said Clara, putting her idle hand on the Doctor’s shoulder. The sudden thought of the girl who would still be waiting for her to come back to the Tower of London and save her had rapidly filled her heart with pain. “You have absolutely no idea how much you really shouldn’t,” the Doctor replied. “You need to go now, before it’s too late.”

“Then help me,” she said, lifting her arm to show the Doctor her vortex manipulator again. “That indigo thing, a code, or a series of digits or whatever it was that Captain Jack dialled… That’s what’s brought me here.”

Clara could hardly believe it when an unexpected sparkle in Doctor’s eyes made his worried expression turn into the one of childish innocence and excitement that she knew only too well and adored only too much. Things got even more unexpected when, out of the blue, he wrapped his arms around her, and lifting a hand, he let it rest on her head as his fingers started to fiddle with her brown hair. The Doctor didn’t know it, but this sudden close proximity to him was making it really hard for Clara not to forget what she was supposed to be doing and just give in, if just by doing that she could stay there in his arms. The thought had just crossed her mind that there was nowhere else she’d rather be.

“What are you doing here?” she asked in a desperate attempt to keep all of her senses together in view of this completely unexpected and strangely intimate encounter. “What’s this place?”

“I’ll be back with you soon, I promise,” said the Doctor cryptically. “I just… I had to come here, Clara. There was one last thing I had to do.”

“It’s okay,” said Clara. She would have loved to ask him what the reason he had been crying was, but as he soon seemed to have almost become his usual happy self again, she decided that she
“There’s one thing I need to do too, so I guess I’d better get going.”

Yes, she had actually said those words, but she hadn’t meant them for one second.

“Is the Bard already with you?” asked the Doctor, leaving an empty space between them as he took a few steps backwards.

“Yes he is,” she said, smiling broadly as she understood the implications of the words he’d just said. Firstly, that this very moment was still in the future for the Doctor. Secondly, that the Doctor himself had just confirmed Edward de Vere to be the very man he’d said he was. And finally, that in the end they had all just been reunited after she had set that poor girl free from her dungeon in the Tower.

“Good! Good!” the Doctor said, sighing with relief and swallowing as he kept nodding repeatedly, which made Clara smile again. For some reason she couldn’t quite grasp, those had been fantastic news. “Here, let me help,” he said, releasing her from his embrace as he took a step backwards and delicately lifted her hand in search of the vortex manipulator.

“I’m not with Captain Jack Harkness,” Clara surprisingly found herself whispering while the Doctor fiddled with her magical bracelet. “I ended up with him the last time I used this thing, but it was an accident… I was trying to find you!”

She hesitated for a moment, during which the Doctor took the sonic out of his jacket pocket and pointed it at the vortex manipulator.

“And you did,” he said shyly as he kept sonicking. “Jack usually… You know… He sort of has this effect on people… And on aliens… Even on droids. Once he told me the story of a…”

“Trust me, he’s not as irresistible as he thinks he is,” she said as she rolled her eyes.

“Okay, this is done now,” said the Doctor, turning off the light of his sonic screwdriver and putting it back inside the pocket of that purple jacket which she had not seen him wearing during the last few hours and which she loved so much, “and you really shouldn’t stay here any longer, Clara, or you might never be able to come back.”

“Okay, I’m leaving! But so are you, right?” she asked in a serious voice, frowning.

“Of course I am!”

“Then why are you still here?”

“I’m here because you’re here,” he replied, putting his hands on her shoulders. “I was actually on my way out when I saw you, but now I’m not leaving until you’ve left first.”

“And can’t we just leave together?”

“Afraid not,” he replied. “We’re going to different places and times,” he replied. “I’ve reprogrammed that thing so that it’ll drag Jack’s to it wherever he might be.”

“But he said his isn’t working.”

“Oh, he was wrong,” said the Doctor. “As usual!”

This time, they both smiled. Clara was a bit confused as she eyed her upgraded toy and lifted the flap in order to get ready to leave. She looked intently into the Doctor’s eyes before she started to
press the usual buttons, and her eyes probably shone when she did – just because his were shining too.

She would have loved to tell him how much she loved him for staying there, wherever that place was and however dangerous it might be, just to make sure that she could leave safely. She would also have loved to tell him how much she would ignore the catastrophe, natural or alien, that apparently was coming to get them, if he should happen to not make it and couldn’t come back right after her, or how fast she would teleport back if she had even the tiniest suspicion that he might have got trapped in that place or anywhere else in the universe. She would have loved to tell him that she would always come back for him.

She would have loved to say all those things and countless others, but she just didn’t, and when she finally opened her mouth, the two words that made their way out of it, she thought, couldn’t have been any sillier.

“See ya,” was all she managed to say before she pressed a crucial last button.

*****

The brief moment they’d spent suspended in space as they journeyed through the time vortex hadn’t made Captain Jack Harkness stop squeezing Edward de Vere’s fingers. The two men were still holding hands and smiling at each other excitedly when the dim lighting of the place they had materialised in caught them both by surprise.

In looking away from his new friend, Jack barely needed half a second to realize where they were, or who they were with. There were small yellow light bulbs scattered all over the place, but the source of the almost fluorescent greenish light shining right in the centre was a time rotor in front of which there seemed to be, to Edward’s great astonishment, a massive hairy egg.

“Oh no,” Jack exclaimed, “we really need to get out of here.”

“Is this a spaceship, Lord Boeshane?” asked Edward, which gained him a confounded look from Jack.

“Yes… It is,” Jack slowly answered with a frown. How could a man from the Renaissance era know what a spaceship was, or that he actually was inside one, even if he was a genius? “Please, call me Jack.”

And it wasn’t just any spaceship, Jack reckoned – it was one that he knew really well! He had spent some time travelling the universe in it with a couple of friends, one of whom happened to be standing right opposite, almost completely dressed in black, as he often did, including his customary black leather jacket.

The time rotor was making a rather scandalous noise, that was why the Ninth Doctor and his friend looked really busy pulling levers and pressing buttons, and also why none of them had even noticed that Edward and him had materialised inside the TARDIS and were now keeping them company. And concerning the person that was keeping the Doctor himself company… Well, that was no friend of Jack’s at all!

“Excuse me, Lord Boeshane,” said the Earl of Oxford, whose incredulous eyes had kept dancing across the room they had suddenly materialised in, as he studied every lever and choral and light
“What’s up, Eddie dear? And it’s Jack, remember?” he replied.

“I beg your pardon, sir Jack,” Edward went on, “but that young man over there…”

“Yes, I know…” said Jack with a sigh.

“…he seems to bear a striking resemblance to…”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed!”

“You, my lord.”

“Yes he does!” Jack exclaimed, feeling delighted. “And don’t I look great in that blue t-shirt!”

“I think I look even better in period costume!” they both heard the other version of Jack say. “I seem to have aged a bit, though.”

“You’d never believe how much you’ve aged, you sexy thing,” Jack told his past self, looking seductively at him as he winked. “Fortunately for us, time’s definitely on our side!”

“What’s this?!” the Ninth Doctor suddenly shouted as his eyes kept moving from one Jack to the other. “Jack! What have you done this time?”

“Oh, look at him!” Renaissance Jack exclaimed, smiling like a Cheshire cat as he took a few steps towards his old friend. “All big nose and big ears and a receding hairline, but doesn’t he look great just like that!”

“Thank you!” the Doctor replied, his own broad smile competing with Jack’s. His happy features, however, shifted to form a grimace of reproach in a matter of microseconds. “And when the time for adulations is over, will you stop glancing at your own backside and tell me how come there are two Jack Harknesses in here? And why are you and your new fling wearing those ridiculous outfits?”

“Accident in time and space, Doc… Oi!” Jack suddenly exclaimed. “Our outfits are not ridiculous! And how do you know Eddie here is my new fling?”

“Because I know you, Jack,” answered the Doctor, crossing his arms over his chest. “I’d have to be really stupid to think that he isn’t.”

Jack pretended to be cross for an instant, but soon he thought it’d be much better to move on to more practical matters.

“We were supposed to be teleporting to the Tower of London.”

“The Tower of London?” the Doctor asked. “And why would you want to teleport to the Tower of London?”

“Cause a friend’s waiting for us there,” Jack replied. “She’s got my vortex manipulator and we were supposed to be teleporting with her, but something must’ve gone wrong at the last moment and we’ve ended up here.”

“Not that I think that ridiculous thing could’ve gotten you all too far anyway,” said the Doctor, “but why should you give it to her in the first place?”
“I didn’t, Doc – she nicked it!” answered Jack. “And from the Black Archive, of all places!”

“She did, didn’t she?” asked a beaming Ninth Doctor. “Fan-tas-tic! Good for her! What was your problem again?”

“We need to get back to her.”

“Then go!”

“Can’t you take us?”

“Can’t you get there by yourselves?”

“No we can’t!”

“And why is that?”

“Because my vortex manipulator doesn’t work!” shouted Jack, a bit upset. “Because you keep deactivating it whenever we meet!”

“I must definitely have a very good reason for that,” said the Doctor, raising his eyebrows. “But right now, it must be working, or you wouldn’t be here at all!”

“I told you, Doc, we’ve come here by accident!”

“I don’t think so, Jack,” said the Doctor enigmatically as he reached out for Jack’s arm and lifted the flap of his vortex manipulator. “See? This is just a little useless thing, but even little useless things can tell when a relative’s around.”

“What did you just say?” Jack asked in confusion.

“What sort of Time Agent are you anyway?” asked the Doctor. “You don’t even know how your own technology works! You said your friend’s wearing one and that she was going to use it…”

“Well, she already has,” Jack told him. “She was locked up in the Tower and she used it to escape.”

“Better and better!” exclaimed the Doctor. “Cause the moment she used hers to escape, yours got a wake-up call. Look!” he added, letting go off Jack’s arm and pointing a forefinger at the vortex manipulator. “It’s alive and kicking!”

In turning his head to his wrist and gaping at his vortex manipulator, Jack realised that the Doctor was right – his little device seemed to be fully operative again. And all of a sudden, everything made sense to him. The two versions of his vortex manipulator had run into each other at the same time and in the same place, and in doing so, they had behaved like the opposite poles of two incredibly powerful magnets. Therefore, the only reason why Clara Oswald had teleported to the vicinity of Whitehall Palace was the fact that he was there – and that he had been wearing his.

“Does this mean,” Edward asked the Doctor, taking a few steps towards Jack and putting his hand on the vortex manipulator itself, “that we can find the lady Clara, sir?”

“Of course it does, you stupid ape! What else could it mean?” exclaimed the Doctor as his eyes darted to Edward. “And yet, in order to avoid trouble, I’d have a couple of adjustments made before you go if you don’t want to…”

Unfortunately for Jack and Edward, they both disappeared from the TARDIS control room, as if by magic, before the Doctor had time to finish that sentence.
“… keep being dragged by the other,” the Doctor said with a sigh.

****

“Well well well,” Jack heard a sexy, self-assured and familiar female voice say. “Not the boy I just texted, but that was fast! So sweet of you to come, Captain, though I’m afraid this is not a fancy dress party.”

The playwright and the former Time Agent were now in a big living room inside what was beyond question a very rich man’s mansion, judging by its size and by the impressive amount of works of art it housed – paintings and sculptures and vases of incalculable value, among many other expensive collectibles. A podgy old man wearing a prohibitive pinstriped black and white suit had stretched his arms upon seeing them, in an attempt to protect all the objects that were on display on the table behind him.

“I’m trying to decide which of those things I should take more personally, Professor,” said Jack, “you texting other boys when I’m not around or you not liking my new dress. I love yours, by the way! Black always makes you look ravishing.”

“Who are you?!?” the terrified old man asked.

“Thank you, darling,” said Professor River Song, “and don’t be jealous, dear, there’s no need! I never text other boys, just the usual one. May I ask, who’s your friend? Not your new husband, I hope…”


“My name is Edward de Vere, my lady,” said Edward as he bowed.

“Oh no!” exclaimed River, her eyes opening wide. “You can’t be!”

“So you know too, huh?” said Jack.

“Of course I know!” replied River. “Liz Ten told me.”

“Who is Liz Ten, my lady?” asked Edward.

“Long story, little time, you handsome thing,” said River, winking at him.

“Now I might be getting a bit jealous,” said Jack.

“As long as wealthy gangster behind me stays put you have nothing to fear,” River went on, “but if you turned around you’d be surprised! Now tell me, what are you doing here?”

“Wish I knew!” said Jack. “We were trying to teleport somewhere with a friend but apparently we seem to be destined to end up in all the wrong places.”

“And why would you do that?” asked River.

“’Cause we’re both wearing vortex manipulators,” said Jack, “and Doc said that…”

“That when two vortex manipulators interact,” she said for him, “they usually enjoy playing hide-
and-seek, among many other things. They also have a thing for wormholes.”

“How do you know that?” asked Jack, incredulous.

“If the Doctor knows, so do I,” she answered as her lips curled into a smile.

“Well, why don’t I know?”

“I don’t know, Captain,” she said, “but knowing you the way I do, I’m sure you were probably naked somewhere else… Don’t worry darling, mommy’s here! Give me your hand, and tell me where it is that you’re trying to go.”

“The Tower of London,” said Jack, “on the morning of 18th May 1600.”

“The Tower of London?” asked River in surprise. “Captain, I think you should know… It’s almost impossible to teleport to the Tower of London. That place’s full of temporal distortions - almost as full as New York 1938!” she added as she looked around her.

“But our friend teleported out,” Jack insisted. “Why wouldn’t we be able to teleport in?”

“Teleporting out is one thing, Captain,” River told him, “but teleporting in is a very different question, especially if you have a particular date in mind. You might never be able to make it unless the Doctor can help you.”

“Here’s there with us actually,” said Jack, “we’d just have to go and find him.”

“Then go!”

“And that’s all?” said Jack. “No hug? No tears? No kiss goodbye?” he asked as he sauntered towards her, rested his hands on her hips and slowly drew his mouth close to hers.

“Oh Jack, you’re such a drama queen,” she replied as she put her hands on his chest.

Unfortunately for Jack, he could only brush his lips against River’s before she pushed him away from her.

“Mr Grayle!” she shouted. “That thing’s moved!”

“Of course it has!” shouted Mr Grayle. “Nobody was looking at it!”

Jack and Edward turned their backs, and the Earl of Oxford was literally petrified by what he saw – a terrifying stone statue of an angel, which looked like no other angel statue he’d ever seen before.

“Captain, you need to leave now,” River said to Jack. “Give me your hand.”

“Always loved Weeping Angels,” said Jack, offering his wrist to River. “Never dated one, though.”

“I’d like to see you try,” River said as she pressed a few buttons on the vortex manipulator by heart, not wanting to take her eyes off the angel behind Jack and his new friend. “Okay boys, time for you to go!”

“And where are we going?”

“To find your friend first of all, then to find the Doctor, and then to the Tower I guess. Not sure this thing will actually take you in or drop you off outside, in which case, trust me Captain, you’d
better walk in.”

“Thank you, my sensual Professor,” said Jack. Then, giving River one of his usual smiles, he added, “I’ll spend my days and my nights in Elizabethan England trying to figure out the best way to repay you.”

“I’ve already decided how I want you to repay me, Captain,” she said, smiling wickedly at him. “Are you looking at the statue, Mr Grayle?”

“Yes I am!”

“Good boy!” she said as she took Edward’s hand and put it on top of Jack’s wrist. Then she darted her eyes from the Weeping Angel right opposite to Edward de Vere in front of her, and looking intently at him, she finished that sentence she had left inconclusive. “And it involves you, Mr Shakespeare.”

Then she turned her face to Jack and smiled, and pressed the last button for him.

*****

Clara wasn’t too sure that she wanted to open her eyes this time, but eventually she did, and luckily for her, a flash of white light came immediately afterwards, leaving Captain Jack and Edward de Vere right in front of her before it faded.

“So happy to see you again, Miss Oswald,” Jack said upon seeing her.

Clara briefly glanced at the faces of the two men who had just materialised in front of her before her eyes were caught by the surroundings and the scene that was going on right behind them.

Whatever the Doctor had done to her vortex manipulator seemed to have worked. She had not been able to see much the first time she had been inside that dungeon in the Tower, only what the moonlight had made visible in its dark interior, but as her eyes quickly studied the place, she recognised the four-poster bed, the widow next to which the girl had been standing the night before, the door that had certainly been locked, and the smell of the food that had been left untouched on a plate in the corner next to the door. Everything was exactly as Clara remembered it. Only that, this time, the girl was not in that room.

The people who were positively there was a future version of herself and definitely of the two Doctors, the three of them still in their tunics, and the scene they seemed to be starring in was anything but a merry one. With her back turned to the newcomers, future Clara was weeping uncontrollably, her head resting on her Doctor’s chest. The Doctor himself looked pretty disturbed as he held her in his arms and caressed her beloved scalp with his long fingers. While this was going on, the Tenth Doctor was looking out of the window in the other side of the room, his arms stretched in front of him as each of his hands was resting on a different corner of the frame. During the little time the Eleventh Doctor and she had spent in the other Time Lord’s company, Clara had quickly gotten used to seeing him looking downcast, but what she saw in his eyes this time was something completely different, something she might have called pure and simple hatred mixed with a feeling of impending doom.

Real-time Clara didn’t even want to try to make any guesses to find out the reason why future Clara might possibly be crying the way she was. For the time being, she could only think of one,
and that was the very reason she would never accept at all. She opened her mouth to ask the Doctors about what had happened, but she found that no words would come out of it at all.

“Doctors,” said Jack instead, “we need your help! Where were you the morning after you lost Clara at St. Paul’s?”

Not even taking the trouble to raise his head or look at them, the Tenth Doctor kept staring out of the window. He made the effort, however, of collecting his scattered thoughts and answering Jack’s question, and it wasn’t easy for him at all.

“The Mermaid Tavern,” he said.

“Irony upon irony,” muttered the Eleventh Doctor bitterly.

“My lady,” Edward suddenly asked real-time Clara, “are you unwell?”

For centuries and centuries to come, William Shakespeare would be regarded as a genius, and Clara had just been half-way through her silly quotation test with him when she had known that to be true.

The girl was gone, and her soul had just broken. And of course, a genius would have known.
The Gang

Chapter Notes

Thanks once again to my dear beta NoPondInTheForest and to you all guays for all your reviews and kudos!

Having to go up a seemingly infinite spiral staircase is undoubtedly bad enough. Things can get even more unpleasant if one finds oneself having to do so in the company of someone else whom one will just not talk to. And yet, when the person one’s not talking to happens to be either one’s own past or future self, one realises that there’s always a way for worst to come to the worst.

In their quest to find clues that might ultimately lead them to Clara, the two breathless and not-on-speaking-terms Doctors had explored all the dark tunnels the passage they had found had led them into. A momentary feeling of achievement took them over when, at long last, they found themselves reaching the top of the last of the spiral staircases and bumping into another wooden door. Putting down the sonic screwdriver he had been using as torch until then, the Eleventh Doctor devoted himself to the task of removing the metal bar that was securing it from inside, and he succeeded – but not without difficulty. He crouched down and carefully left the bar on the floor, then stood up again, and gathering all his strength, he pushed, but the door wouldn’t open. As his fingers curled around the large metal handle, he was struck by a thought, and not a pleasant one at all. This, he realised, was for the time being his last chance to find Clara, and this door that he was trying to open could be a door to hope as much as it could be a door to despair.

Eventually, the Doctor gripped the handle firmly and pulled, but as the door still wouldn’t open, he tried pushing again. Once again, nothing happened, so he pulled again, then pushed, and pulled, and pushed, and then kept pulling and pushing for a while, but unfortunately to no avail.

“What on earth are you doing, Chinny?” asked the Tenth Doctor, sonic still in hand, finally breaking the uncomfortable and bitter silence between them.

“What on earth do you think I’m doing, Sandshoes?” answered the older Time Lord, who just wouldn’t stop pushing and pulling.

“Oh, come on, it’s just a door!” said the Tenth Doctor grimacing, unable to believe his eyes. “How difficult can it be to open it?”

“If you ask me, I’d say this particular door can be astonishingly difficult!” grunted the Eleventh Doctor. “You wanna try?”

“Thought you’d never ask!” answered the Tenth Doctor, his voice full of sarcasm.

The moment the Tenth Doctor put his sonic down, darkness fell upon the small passage except for the almost imperceptible rays of daylight that filtered through the edges of the door. The Eleventh Doctor stepped aside so that Past Him could pull and push to his liking, and pull and push he did indeed, but with pretty much the same result.

“I don’t know why we’re even bothering,” said the Eleventh Doctor. “If the door had been opened recently, that bar I removed wouldn’t have been there at all.”
“Shut up and let me push in peace,” replied the Tenth Doctor, who had just worked up a sweat.

“Not to mention,” went on the Eleventh Doctor, who hadn’t really been listening to what his previous self had just said, “if neither I nor you can open it, do we really think Clara could have stood a chance?”

And it was precisely in that moment when the most unexpected thing happened. There was an unhoped-for sound which indicated the door was being unlocked from the outside. Then, in under three seconds, it gave in, and the two Time Lords suddenly found themselves standing face to face in front of Clara herself and some mysterious Renaissance man.

“Clara!” shouted the Eleventh Doctor. His happiness at finding his impossible girl right there in front of him made him jump through the door and out of the passage to run to her, but it vanished completely the moment the identity of the man who had unlocked the door was revealed as his face emerged from behind it. “Clara?” he repeated, his mouth twisted with disgust as he kept pointing at the sudden and unwelcome guest. “What on earth are you doing with him? Oh please, tell me you’re not with him… You can’t be with him, for goodness’ sake!”

“You were so much nicer to me the last time I paid a surprise visit, Doctor,” said Jack, pretending to be offended.

“How did you find us?” asked the Tenth Doctor stepping outdoors, as the other Doctor had done.

In the meanwhile, Clara took a few steps closer to her Doctor and hugged him on the spot.

“Clara Oswald, what did I tell you?” the Eleventh Doctor said softly to her as he hugged her back. “Don’t you ever dare leave me,” he whispered in her ear.

“We bumped into you in the future, Doc, and you told us where you were,” Jack told the Tenth Doctor.

“Oh we did, didn’t we? Brilliant!” said the Tenth Doctor excitedly. “And may I ask, where are we?”

“We are standing right in front of one of the two entrances to The Mermaid Tavern, sir,” Edward answered. “The most popular of the two entrances, and the one I always use to enter the tavern myself, is the one located on Friday Street, sir, right around the corner. It fills me with the deepest shame, sir, to discover the entrance on Bread Street to be a fake one, and to realise that I have never had any knowledge of it until this moment.”

It had already been a while since the Tenth Doctor directed a stern look at Edward de Vere.

“And who are you, sir?” he asked him.

“Clara?” asked her the Eleventh Doctor in surprise as he took a step backwards and let his hands rest on her shoulders. “What’s wrong? Why are you shaking?”

“Doctor, we need to go to the Tower immediately,” she said, her voice almost breaking.

“Of course we’ll go to the Tower immediately,” he told her. “What’s going on there? Have you found out anything interesting?”

“Do you really think it’s a good idea to have this conversation in the middle of the street, Chinny?” asked the Tenth Doctor as he took a look around them. It was probably midday, as the street was vibrant and busy and there were considerable amounts of people walking up and down that
particular corner of the town. In consequence, the Tenth Doctor lifted his hand and pointed over his shoulder with his thumb, at the dark passage he and the other Doctor had emerged from, and then he quickly disappeared into it. The others immediately followed.

Once they were all inside, Edward de Vere, who’d been the last of the party to get in, closed the door and joined the circle the others had gathered around, but the moment he did he was blinded by two unexpected flashes of blue. Disturbing and annoying as they were, he couldn’t help but keep staring at them, as they were like nothing else he had ever seen.

What happened next came naturally to the Doctors. Each of them grabbed Edward by an arm, pushed him towards the door and threw him out against his will, then closed the door and left him out of the passage.

“What do you think you’re doing, Doctors?” asked an incredulous Jack pointing at the door the Doctors had just closed.

“What do you think you’re doing, Jack?” asked a furious Tenth Doctor. “You were supposed to be undercover, but even so, you had nothing better to do than to invite one of your flings to keep you company!”

“Oh, look who’s talking!” Jack snapped. “The man who’s been taking his flings to his place since who knows when! But so as you know, Doctor, that was no ordinary fling – that was William Shakespeare!”

“No, that wasn’t,” said the Tenth Doctor, snorting. “I met Shakespeare once, Jack, and so as you know, he looked nothing like that man. Besides, I don’t think he’d live up to your expectations. You see – he happened to fancy Martha. A lot.”

“Martha Jones?” asked Clara.

“Well, that bloke had excellent taste in women, I’ll give him that,” Jack replied, “but so far you haven’t given me any reasons why he should’ve been disappointed if I’d had the chance to spend a night with him… In any case, Doctor, that guy you and Martha met must’ve been Fake Shakes.”

“What do you mean, Fake Shakes?” the Eleventh Doctor asked him, narrowing his eyes.

“I mean that the man you’ve both thrown out of this room is the man who’s truly written all of Shakespeare’s plays, and for the record, his name is Edward de Vere.”

“He’s right, Doctor,” added Clara. “I couldn’t believe it at first either, but he’s telling the truth.”

The Eleventh Doctor narrowed his eyes again as he took in the conviction he was seeing in Clara’s big round eyes.

“Well,” his past self finally said, “I’m sure you’ll understand if I say I’d like to see that for myself, and I’m sure so would Chinny!”

Fixing his eyes on the former Time Agent, the younger Doctor tilted his head slightly in the direction of the door. Captain Jack Harkness rushed to open it and then reached out for Edward, who had patiently been waiting outside all the while, as Jack had imagined that he would.

“It’s okay, Eddie,” Jack told him, reaching out a hand to him by way of invitation. “You can come in.”

Edward smiled shyly and kept his eyes fixed on Lord Boeshane as he went through the door for the
third time in what Jack thought to be a ridiculously short space of time. As soon as his new friend shut the door behind him, the Earl of Oxford made a beeline for the Doctors, whose faces were now the ones being lighted up by the green and blue lights of their sonic screwdrivers.

The two Time Lords kept looking at him pointedly for an instant until the Tenth Doctor decided to break the silence.

“The ides of March are come,” he said defiantly. “How does that sentence end, Mr de Vere?”

“Doctor, stop it,” Clara told the Tenth Doctor as she pulled the sleeve of his tunic. “That’s exactly what I’ve done.”

“Oh, is it?!” said the Eleventh Doctor as he looked at her with a feeling of pride. “Well done, Clara!”

“Well done indeed,” said the Tenth Doctor. “When I met Shakespeare, whoever that man might’ve been, I kept quoting some of his verses but he never seemed to recognise a single one of them…”


“I knew that,” said Clara. “You told me when we got here, Doctor, and that was why I did it. Can we go to the Tower now?”

“Gentlemen,” said Edward with his customary bow. “The extraordinary nature of the events my eyes have witnessed in the last few hours tells me you must be most extraordinary men. For that reason, I shall leave aside my resentment for your former manifestation of distrust – which otherwise was entirely justified by the fact that we had never met before this instant – and express my contentment at having the honour of providing my assistance in your mission, which, I have gathered, is most secret and delicate. My name is Edward de Vere, and I am the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford.”

“Oh, wow!” exclaimed the Eleventh Doctor, his eyes shining brightly as he went on speaking enthusiastically. “Nice introduction, Verie! Can I call you Verie? I love the way that sounds! I’m the Doctor so call me Doctor, everybody does that. Well, everybody except him – he calls me…”

“Will you please stop jabbering, Chinny?” the Tenth Doctor finally manage to say. “Nice to meet you, Edward. You don’t mind me calling you by your first name, do you?”

“Not at all, sir.”

“Good! Good!” he said as his eyes widened. “I’m the Doctor, and he’s also the Doctor, so whenever you want to speak to any of us, just say ‘Doctor!’ , then wait until one of us turns around first. Guess it’ll be me anyway. Chinny here will probably be extremely busy babbling and flailing his arms about, so no matter how loudly you may call him – he won’t hear you.”

“Oi!”

“Oh dear…” interrupted Clara, her eyes darting from one Doctor to the other. “I’d forgotten what you two are like when you’re together.”

The two Time Lords went immediately quiet after hearing her say that. All at once, it had hit them how, during the hours they’d spent together exploring that one last tunnel not talking to each other, oddly enough, they’d sort f missed those silly rows of theirs.

“Well,” Clara went on, “in case anyone’s interested, I’ve been to the Tower.”
“What?” the Doctors exclaimed in unison, equally shocked by Clara’s news.

“Yes I was!” she told them. “It would seem that putting on a tunic and pretending you’re a monk is the most atrocious crime you can commit if you happen to be a woman. And yes, I was imprisoned by the same people who have a woman on the throne… Anyway, I found a few things out. The prisoners, for starters – once they’re taken to the torture chamber, they never come back to their cells.”

“Do they actually make it to the torture chamber?” asked her the Tenth Doctor.

“I don’t know,” she answered. “Didn’t really have time to find that out.”

“How many prisoners are gone?” asked the Eleventh Doctor.

“I’d say nearly all of them,” Clara told him.

“Nearly all of them?” asked the Tenth Doctor, furrowing his brow as he marked the word ‘nearly’.

“There’s a girl in one of the dungeons,” she went on as her eyes turned to the Tenth Doctor, “and I think she’s the only person held captive in the Tower at the moment. Captain Jack and I tried to go back and set her free but ended up in the future, and by then she wasn’t there anymore.”

“How exactly did you turn up in the future?” asked the Tenth Doctor.

“Oh… With this!” she answered as she lifted her forearm and rolled up her tunic sleeve, and the Doctors’ screwdrivers and eyes fell upon the vortex manipulator that was wrapped around Clara’s wrist.

“Clara!” whispered the Eleventh Doctor as a broad smile spread over his face. “You’re still wearing that!”

“Guess I completely forgot that I was the moment Kate Stewart said there wouldn’t be enough power for a round trip,” she told him.

“So…,” started the Tenth Doctor, trying in vain to conceal how upset he was feeling, “We walked and walked and walked, first across the countryside, then around the city, through tunnels, and up and down those bloody staircases. And all the while, we could just have teleported?”

“I suppose this won’t make things any better,” interrupted Jack as he pulled up his sleeve high enough to make his own vortex manipulator visible, “but yes, we could’ve teleported, and quite comfortably even.”

“No way!” said a surprised Tenth Doctor. “Is it working?”

“Seems all it needed was a confidence boost from its twin over there,” Jack replied, directing his gaze to Clara’s wrist.

“Oh, brilliant,” protested the Tenth Doctor. “So we could’ve saved lots of time!”

“We could start saving time this instant, Sandshoes,” said the Eleventh Doctor. “We already know what Clara’s been up to. What about you, Jack? What did you find out?”

“Well,” Jack answered, “you won’t believe this, Doctors, but all seems to indicate that Elizabeth I is a married queen.”

The absence of surprise or interest Captain Jack Harkness saw in Clara’s and the Doctors’ faces
made him think that maybe, for some incomprehensible reason, they might have not understood his words… But was that even possible?

“Did you listen to me just now?” he asked them. “I said ‘married’. Queen Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen, is a married woman.” Still, Clara or the Doctors wouldn’t say a word. They just kept staring at him, seemingly waiting for the punch line. “Am I being really stupid right now? ‘Cause I honestly thought that piece of information would be terribly relevant!”

“Well, as it turns out, it is not,” answered the Tenth Doctor harshly while his future self and Clara looked at him out of the corner of their eye. “So – the Queen’s married. And?”

“There’s something you’re not telling, Doctor… What is it?” Jack asked him, confusion written all over his face.

“If he doesn’t tell you, I will,” the Eleventh Doctor told him.

“No, you won’t!” said the Tenth Doctor indignantly.

“We know she’s married, Captain,” Clara told Jack. “We were there. We saw it. What else did you find out.”

Jack’s eyes darted from Clara to the Doctors. There was an important amount of questions that he would have loved to ask them, but as it was crystal clear he wasn’t being given the chance to ask for the time being, he gave up and gave them the information they had been requesting from being.

“Apparently the Queen’s been planning to have her husband publicly executed tomorrow morning.”

The Tenth Doctor snorted again and kept looking at Jack with a silly expression on his face, but when Clara and the other Doctor turned their heads at neck-break speed in order to face him, he started to become a little uneasy.

“What?” he asked them. “What is it? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Doctor…,” said Clara, putting her thoughts into words without even taking the time to decide if they made any sense for starters, “what if that’s always been the Queen’s plan?”

“You’re not being serious, are you?” the Tenth Doctor said to her.

“But that might be what the big day’s all about, don’t you think?” She crossed her arms over chest as she went on. “The Queen lures you into a trap, threatening to kill you if you try to stop whatever it is she’s planning to do, when that had been her intention all along – to make you come here so that she can finally lay her hands on you.”

“You married Elizabeth I?” asked Jack, his eyes fixed on the Tenth Doctor.

“Yes he did,” promptly answered the Eleventh Doctor.

“It was an accident,” grunted the Tenth Doctor.

“If you will pardon my interference, sirs,” interrupted the Earl of Oxford, “since I have gathered that you do not belong in this place or time, may I ask, is that what has brought you here? A threat by Queen Elizabeth?”

“You haven’t filled him in yet?” the Eleventh Doctor asked Jack and Clara.
“Haven’t really had the time,” Jack answered, “and given that five minutes ago neither of you really trusted him, Doctors, why don’t you do it yourselves?”

“Fair enough,” said the Tenth Doctor, and then, turning to Edward, he started to explain. “Cutting a long story short, Edward, Queen Elizabeth and I, we go way back. These days, she hates me and she’s threatened me.”

“And what has she threatened to do, sir?” Edward asked.

“She said she’d destroy something that is valuable to me,” answered the Doctor. “Well, to the Doctor.”

“To us,” added the Eleventh Doctor. “We came here to find out all the details about what she’s planning to do, but now I think Clara might be just right...”

“And do you think that what’s going on in the Tower has nothing to do with her plan then?” asked Clara. “What about the beast and the goddess people keep talking about?”

“Superstitions?” said the two Doctors as if by mutual agreement, looking at each other with a frown.

“So no mystery to solve this time? No aliens in Elizabethan London?” she pressed on.

“Well,” said the Tenth Doctor, “I guess we’ll only find that out if we go to the Tower.”

“With all due respect, sirs,” Edward interrupted, “my lady Clara is right.”

“Right about what?” asked the Tenth Doctor nonplussed.

“There are alien beasts in the Tower, sir,” said Edward, “I’ve seen them with my own eyes. They’re called ‘Zygons’, sir.”

“Zygons?!” the Doctors muttered.

“Indeed, my lords,” said Edward. “They have been living amongst us for decades.”

The two Doctors crossed their arms as they frowned, both caught short by Edward’s words, until they suddenly grasped their implications.

There were still Zygons in Elizabethan England. They had stopped them from invading the future on their previous visit, but for some reason they had stayed in London. And if they still regarded Queen Elizabeth as their supreme commander, which the Doctors were sure they did, what wouldn’t they do for her?
As always, big big thank you to my der beta NoPondInTheForest and to you guys for your kudos and reviews! In this chapter I've had no choice but to mention certain nasty objects... Reading about them and what they were used for was creepy enough, that's why I've merely enumerated them in this chapter. No need to panic!

The Earl of Oxford proved to be fascinating beyond imagination. Not only did he turn out to know a thing or two about aliens, but as fate would have it, he also went way back with Queen Elizabeth I and had a troubled relationship with her.

Edward de Vere – or Edward ‘the Bard’, as the Eleventh Doctor was insisting on calling him –, had been a child prodigy raised into one of the most distinguished families in the country, and his tutors had included some of the most remarkable men of the time. His knowledge of Latin, Greek, French, Italian, literature, astronomy, geography, the law, and the natural world – among many other subjects – was thus unique. He had already been writing plays at the age of eight, and by the time he was sixteen, he had already got hold of degrees from the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. His literary ambitions, however, started to plunge after the death of his father – when, stripped of his home and his lands, Edward had no choice but to settle in the household of William Cecil, and later on, to marry his daughter Anne. He had not even been married for a fortnight when his dreams of writing and staging and living by his pen inevitably plummeted to earth. Literature – his wife and his father-in-law would remind him on a daily basis – was no occupation for a nobleman. And still, far from being ashamed of his artistic inclinations, Edward could never think of any objections as to their being a gentleman’s passion if they were never going to become his profession. And so, he carried on writing.

Owing to the strong bond of friendship and trust shared by Queen Elizabeth I and William Cecil, Edward and Anne soon became courtiers, and owing to the Queen’s passion for the theatre, Edward saw many of his plays staged at court for a merry short while, much to his in-laws’ disapproval. The Queen and the Earl seemed to enjoy each other’s company as much as she seemed to enjoy his plays. Soon thus he became her favourite and, in Edward’s own words, rumourmongers did the rest.

At that point, however, something happened – something involving Edward and one of the Queen’s ladies-in-waiting, and something painful enough for him not to want to tell the Doctors or Jack or Clara about it. The outcome of such mysterious event, he dejectedly told them, was his banishment from court.

In time, Edward regained the Queen’s favour, but he never came back to court. During his long years of absence, he found the place where he was destined to spend his leisure time from then on – The Globe –, and the company he willingly chose to keep for his future – that of actors and other playwrights. Unfortunately, however, court would not forget him, and for years and years to come, the Cecils did everything in their power to prevent his name from being associated to his plays, just because the truth about the lives of kings and queens in his stories of ambition and conflict happened to be an uncomfortable one. As a consequence, as he would by no means give up in his attempts to have his plays printed and staged, Edward had no choice but to seek help from amongst
his friends at the playhouse. That was how a William Shakespeare found him, and how he became a ghost writer.

It was also after his banishment from court that his interest in aliens raised, and as he gave the time travellers long and detailed accounts of the many studies he had conducted on Zygons, in the end, there was no room for doubt. It was not only in literature that Edward de Vere was ahead of his time.

“And these rooms here, sirs,” Edward said as he led Jack, Clara and the Doctors into a tunnel in the basement of the Tower of London, “this is where their headquarters used to be.”

The Eleventh Doctor and Clara recognised the dark chamber immediately as they had been there not long before. It was the Zygons’ lair, the place where they had put their technology to use with the aim of teleporting into the paintings that would later be exhibited in the National Gallery. Just by placing a hand on a powerful glass-like sphere, the creatures had been transferred from reality to a painting, which they had called ‘stasis cube’. Once inside it, they waited for centuries and centuries in order to fulfil their plan of conquering the Earth – and had eventually been stopped.

The Doctors’ eyes roamed around the place in search of some kind of evidence that would indicate the Zygons were still using that room for their own purposes these days, but they couldn’t find any.

“This place must have been abandoned for years,” finally said the Eleventh Doctor.

“Indeed it has, sir,” Edward told him. “All these alien creatures have long abided at court.”

“At court?” asked the Tenth Doctor grimacing.

“Yes, sir,” Edward answered. “With the exception of the servants and most of the foreign ambassadors, I am afraid at present most courtiers are Zygons. As a matter of fact, they have been so for years. Even Her Majesty’s ladies-in-waiting are!”

“What?” asked a surprised Captain Jack Harkness. “Lady Caroline is a Zygon?” The smirk that suddenly appeared on his lips indicated that he was more than satisfied with this unexpected discovery. “Naughty little creature… She never told me!”

“Why would the Queen want to surround herself with Zygons?” asked Clara.

“Because she does not trust humans anymore, my lady,” Edward replied.

“She doesn’t trust humans but she trusts Zygons?” asked the Tenth Doctor.

“Take it from me, Doctor – she’s got reasons to distrust Zygons too,” said Jack.

All human beings were different. The Doctor had met too many of them as to ignore that much, but he had also met as many as to know full well that, given the right circumstances, they could be of like mind. The silence, the odours, and the emptiness of the endless corridors in the lower Wakefield Tower were having an equally unnerving and gloomy effect on this gang of intruders, and different as they all were – a teacher of English from twentieth-century London, a reputed playwright and nobleman from the sixteenth century, a fifty-first century Time Agent who had startlingly become immortal owing to something as unpredictable as chance, and a mighty Time Lord who had spent about the last thousand years travelling in time and space –, the lighter tone in their conversation was welcomed by each and every single one of them.

They continued to walk along those long dark corridors and soon found themselves inside another room – one that appeared to be particularly blood-curdling. From their place near the entrance and
even in the dim illumination provided by the Doctors’ screwdrivers and Jack’s torch, they all could see several sets of manacles hanging from the ceiling. Once they started to roam around the room, the rest of the hellish instruments the chamber housed were revealed to them. All over the place, there were Judas chairs, Judas cradles, wooden horses, metal coffins, breast rippers, and crocodile shears. In a place of honour in the middle of the room, there were a rack, a head crusher, and a Scavenger’s daughter.

“The Torture Chamber,” Jack muttered.

“Oh yes,” added the Eleventh Doctor, “and it’s definitely living up to my expectations.”

Edward, Jack, Clara, and the Doctors were overcome with horror as they took a moment to inspect those objects more thoroughly. The Doctors chose to examine them together with Edward de Vere following a short distance behind them, whereas Jack kept walking behind Clara.

“Can anyone else smell the spookiness in here?” asked the Eleventh Doctor, keeping a straight face.

“This is… Gruesome,” said Jack with abhorrence as he stood next to a wooden table on top of which there were several objects on display.

“That thing over there…,” said Clara, pointing at the corner of that same table, where some lead sprinklers and thumbscrews could be seen. “What can that be for? Oh well… Forget it! I don’t really want to know.”

“If it makes you feel any better, Clara,” said to her the Tenth Doctor, taking a look around the room, “I think the Spanish Inquisition was even worse.”

“I know you mean well, Doctor – but no, that’s not making me feel any better,” she told him. “The thought that people are actually made to suffer in here is making me sick…”

“I hate this place too,” replied the Eleventh Doctor, who was looking at the waist harness of one of the Judas cradles with a grimace of revulsion. “Jack? Why don’t you play something?”

“What?” asked the Tenth Doctor, turning to his future self. “What did you just say, Chinny?”

“I just think all of us could use some music, Sandshoes,” told him the Eleventh Doctor.

“Good thought indeed!” ironically said the Tenth Doctor. “But first, why don’t we make sure that no one else can listen to it too?”

“Don’t be such a spoilsport… This place is empty!” exclaimed the Eleventh Doctor.

“Not absolutely empty, Chinny, let me remind you!” the Tenth Doctor answered, and then, turning to Clara, he went on. “Clara? Where exactly is that girl friend of yours?”

“Locked up in one of the dungeons,” she told him.

“See?” the younger Time Lord said, turning to his future self triumphantly.

“And where exactly are the dungeons?” the Eleventh Doctor asked Clara.

“I don’t know,” she replied with a sigh, “up there somewhere, but we must find them and set her free. In fact, shouldn’t we just start looking for her right now? There are no Zygons here anymore, Doctor, anyone can see that…”
“My lady Clara is right, sirs,” Edward told them. “In order to find Zygons, it is court that we should be going to.”

“Tell me about it,” said Jack. “But we came here to find that girl, Eddie, so let’s go get her and then head for Whitehall Palace. What do you reckon?”

“Well, I can’t see why not…,” added the Tenth Doctor.

Upon hearing them all, Clara sighed with relief. In her mind, a vision would not stop tormenting her – that of the scene she had witnessed before the vortex manipulator had taken her to The Mermaid Tavern together with Jack and Edward. Upon finally teleporting to the Tower of London, she had been punished with a glimpse into a future in which the girl had not been inside that dungeon anymore and Clara had seen a future version of herself crying into the Doctor’s arms. What the fate of that poor girl might have been, she had no idea, but what she did know now was that those things she had seen had definitely not happened yet. She knew there was still a glimmer of hope, and for a very simple reason – the nightmarish scene she had accidentally witnessed had taken place in broad daylight, she remembered that very well, and as she, the Doctors, and the two men in Renaissance costume had made their way into the Tower very soon after dusk, she might still be able to get that girl out of there before the morning came. That way, the things she had seen would never even happen in the first place... All she needed to do was find the right dungeon as soon as could be!

“Isn’t it great, having a gang? I love having a gang!” announced the Eleventh Doctor, forcing her out of her absent-mindedness. The Time Lord’s latest attempt at finding a little ray of sunshine in the middle of their bleak surroundings had been thwarted by his previous self’s refusal to let Jack play some music. Now he was enjoying himself after his friends’ contributions had helped him make a plan he had not really had until then, making him genuinely excited. “It’s only every now and then that I have one… The last one I can remember right now included John Riddell and Queen Nefertiti.”

“That’s the only gang you remember having, Doctor?” interrupted Jack, sounding really offended as his eyes darted from one of the metal coffins to the new Doctor.

“Well, I’ve suddenly realised that Strax, Jenny and Madame Vastra wouldn’t have been very happy if they’d heard what I just said either,” he added.

“You’re doing it on purpose, aren’t you?” asked him the Tenth Doctor.

“What am I supposed to be doing on purpose this time?” the Eleventh Doctor asked in confusion.

“My dear friends,” interrupted Edward, unwittingly preventing the Doctors from starting another quarrel, and his interruption was most welcomed by Clara and Jack, “I think I may have made a most outstanding discovery.”

Jack, Clara and the Doctors turned to him. At first he was just a black shadow in the dark, but when the light of Jack’s torch finally started to shine on him, they saw him studying his free hand while holding a short candle he had found and somehow managed to light up with the other.

“I was simply reaching for that infamous device you will find above my head,” he indicated. The others looked up and saw a breast ripper that had been attached to the wall by means of three long rusty bent nails, on which it had been left resting. “As luck would have it, sirs, I pricked my forefinger with it when I did.”

“Ouch!” exclaimed the Eleventh Doctor. “Did it hurt?”
“And what happened then?” asked Jack with a frown.

“A most marvellous thing,” answered Edward in wonder.

“Well, and what was it?” asked the Tenth Doctor, his tone indicating that he was starting to run out of patience. “Did you have a revelation?”

“Indeed I did, sir,” said Edward, still lost in wonder.

“Oh, you did, didn’t you? Brilliant! Did you hear any voices?” the Tenth Doctor asked sarcastically.

“Doctor!” exclaimed Clara, frowning upon him.

“I know!” the Doctor said, his mouth gaping as he furrowed his brow. “I’m being rude! I’m sorry, Edward! I deeply apologise!”

“There is no need, sir,” Edward told him. “As it happens, I am starting to hear voices this very instant, sir… No! Not voices… Just one voice! And indeed it is the most beautiful voice I have ever heard, sirs! And that song! It is spellbinding! Like a siren song!”

“Well, personally, I wouldn’t describe it as spellbinding,” said the Tenth Doctor. “Beautiful? Oh, certainly! Magnetic? Well… Maybe! But definitely not spellbinding…”

“So you can hear it too!” exclaimed Jack and Clara at the same time.

“What?” the Tenth Doctor asked them, quite confused.

“The song! You can hear it!” said Jack.

“Of course I can hear it! Can’t you?” the Tenth Doctor asked them.

“Yes, I can,” Jack replied in amazement. “Can you, Clara?”

“Oh yes,” she answered as her eyes widened.

A female voice singing an enchanting song had indeed started to sound inside the room, and the Eleventh Doctor had been the only one in the party who had shuddered upon hearing it.

“Oh!” he cried out. Lowering his eyebrows and squinting, he stood still for a moment before he crossed the room in four strides to get to the Earl of Oxford. Once by his side, the Doctor grabbed the hand that Edward had been examining minutes before, and using the light of his screwdriver to inspect it carefully, all his questions got their answers the second he saw what he saw.

There was a black spot in the middle of the playwright’s palm.

“It’s her…,” the Doctor blurted out as his eyes started to glare.

“Who?” Jack asked.

“The goddess… The goddess in the Tower…” he answered as he smiled. “And the disappearances, and the beast… It’s her! It’s been her all the time!”

“And who is she?” asked Clara.

The Eleventh Doctor was prevented from answering that question by a human form suddenly
springing up out of a bucket in the corner of the room. He had been expecting it to be encompassed by a green shaft of light, but to his surprise, it turned out to be an orange one, smoky, sparkling and spiralling.

Clara, Jack, and the Tenth Doctor kept staring in amazement at the singing creature floating in the air. It was obvious to them that it couldn’t be human, but it most certainly had a human form. And quite an attractive one, Jack thought – long fair hair, which looked flaming orange in that fiery glow, a beautiful face, and glaring but very sad eyes.

“What are you?” the Tenth Doctor asked, staring at her in admiration.

The creature, however, didn’t spare him a single glance. Slowly but surely, she descended to the ground, never taking her eyes off Edward, and when her bare feet finally touched the cold stone floor, she stepped closer and closer in his direction, and eventually reached out a hand to him.

Jack noticed Edward bumping into him as he started to make his way towards the creature. The Earl of Oxford, however, was no longer himself. His eyes had turned into a madman’s, and he was moaning and reaching out for the creature as he walked in her direction.

“What’s happening to him?” asked Jack worriedly. “He looks like he’s completely lost it!”

“What is your substance,” they all heard him say as if in a trance, “whereof are you made, that millions of strange shadows on you tend?”

“What’s that? What’s he saying?” asked Jack.

“I think it’s one of his sonnets,” answered Clara in bewilderment.

And then, all of a sudden, Edward was pulverized the instant his fingertips did something as simple as caress the creature’s.

“She’s killed him!” shouted Clara after a brief instant of silence.

“What have you done!” screamed an incredulous Tenth Doctor, clenching his teeth as he looked at the floating being suspended in the air, but by the time he finished asking that question, the creature had also vanished into thin air.

“What is she?” asked Jack. “And why would she want to take him instead of us?”

“You!” suddenly screamed the Tenth Doctor, stabbing his finger at his future self’s chest. “You’d seen her before… You knew her! You knew what she was going to do and yet you did nothing to stop her! Why?!"

Oddly enough, the Eleventh Doctor had not heard those last words, not even the words that had been said before those. As it happened, his mind and all his senses were far away from that chamber and the people that were in it. They had left that place the moment the creature had appeared, and they had run away after her, trying to get her and hold her tight and never let her leave him again.

“But why?” he kept thinking, and he hated not being able to answer that question yet. He only knew he had to find her, and that nothing in the world would stop him from finding her.

He had to find out why the creature that had just vanished had had the form of a human being that, not long before, he had known very well, and his lips, which from the moment she first appeared, had remained completely silent, finally betrayed her name.
“Pond!” he cried out, reaching out a hand for her.
I definitely don't know where I'd be without my dear beta NoPondInTheForest, nor will I ever be able to write enough words to thank her! I've sort of rewritten the story of the siren in "The Curse of the Black Spot", hope you guys won't mind too much! Thanks again for all the kudos and reviews! I hope you'll enjoy this chapter :-)

“Don’t worry about the Bard,” the Eleventh Doctor eventually told his friends. “I’ve met this creature before. She won’t hurt him.”

“But she’s turned him into dust!” exclaimed Jack, utterly unable to believe his ears.

“Yes she has, but she’s not killed him,” the Doctor replied much to Jack’s dismay. “The first time I met her everyone thought she had killed lots of men – pirates –, that she had haunted them to their deaths. In the end we found out she had actually been saving them.”

“Saving them?” asked the Tenth Doctor.

“We were on a pirate ship,” the Eleventh Doctor went on, staring into nothingness as the memory of Amy and Rory made his hair stand on end. “A female-looking creature kept emerging from the ocean, singing and driving the pirates mad. The siren. That’s what they called her.”

“But we’re not in the ocean now, Doc,” Jack cut in, “so how can she be here?”

“She came from in there,” answered the Doctor as he turned and pointed to the corner of the chamber, where a bucket full of water had lay unnoticed all along. “All she needed to get here was the reflection of our lights on the water.”

“So she uses reflections as a portal…,” the Tenth Doctor thought out loud, frowning.

“Okay, reflections and portals,” promptly said Clara. She might not have been travelling with the Doctor for too long, but she had soon developed the ability to process any information he’d give her quickly, no matter how incredible or impossible it might sound. “Now back to Edward. If she didn’t kill him, then where is he? Where did she take him?”

“Nowhere,” the Eleventh Doctor told her. “He’s still here.”

“Doctor, I don’t understand,” she replied, shaking her head slightly.

Of course she didn’t understand, the Doctor thought. In fact, he very much doubted that any of the others had understood him at all! Were Amelia Pond’s face to disappear from his mind, then he might stand a chance to make himself properly understood, but that face would not leave him, and for as long as it stayed with him, he knew he would never be able to say anything that made sense.

And yet, for the sake of all the people who had disappeared from the Tower, he had to try.

“Have you ever seen one of those films in which a suspect is being interrogated by the police, Clara?” he started to explain, as slowly and as carefully as he could. “Usually, there’s a mirror in
the room. Well, it’s not really a mirror, but it looks like a mirror to the people inside that room. What it really is, however, is a window, and behind it other police officers are watching while the suspect’s being cross-examined. Well, the siren’s hiding behind one of those fake mirrors. From inside this room, all we can see is the mirror, but she’s on the other side, and every once in a while, when she’s convinced that someone needs her help, she opens the window and jumps out.”

“Is she watching us now then?” asked Clara.

“Watching us?” asked the Doctor with a grimace of disgust. “Why would she be watching us? That’d be silly! What she’s doing right now is… Sort of smelling our blood.”

“And does she really need a magic window for that?” asked Jack.

“Of course she doesn’t,” said the Eleventh Doctor. “What she needs is a spaceship. That’s what her window is – her spaceship.”

“So she’s on a different plane!” exclaimed the Tenth Doctor, his eyes beaming with delight. “She comes from a different reality!”

“Exactly,” replied the Eleventh Doctor, snapping his fingers and pointing his index at his past self. “And her reality has collided with ours.”

“And how can we get into her reality to find Eddie?” Jack asked with impatience. “Through that bucket over there?”

“We’ll get in the same way he did,” the Doctor told him. “The same way all the others did. And that is, through the looking glass.”

Having said those words, the Eleventh Doctor turned around and pointed at the breast ripper hanging on the wall.

“We need to prick our fingers?” asked Jack incredulously. “Why?”

“Because she’s a nurse,” the Eleventh Doctor replied, “and the moment we get even the most insignificant injury in our bodies she’ll come and take us to her space-travelling sickbay.”

The Tenth Doctor’s eyes and mouth gaped wide.

“So that’s what’s happened to the prisoners!” he exclaimed, raising his eyebrows.

“They were taken down here to be tortured but then they were never seen again, remember?” the Eleventh Doctor told him.

Clara and Jack looked at each other with a glance of recognition.

“All we have to do is prick ourselves,” the Eleventh Doctor went on. “She’ll come for us as soon as we’ve done so, and then we’ll do what Edward did – we’ll reach for her hand in a trance, and when we touch her we’ll break into millions of ashy specks. That’s when she’ll take us to her dimension – to her spaceship – and there we’ll find Edward and all the others.”

“Okay, so what are we waiting for? Let’s get to it!” said Jack as he dashed towards the breast ripper on which the Earl of Oxford had pricked his finger. He stopped right in front of it, studying its sharp edges for an instant before he raised an arm and pricked his right thumb with one of them.

On the other side of the room, the Tenth Doctor had decided to use one of the Judas chairs to hurt
himself instead. Getting close to it, he slid a hand along the armrest so as to get his palm scratched by the countless metal spikes that covered it.

Regardless of the different methods they had chosen to cause themselves their injuries, both Captain Jack Harkness and the Tenth Doctor could soon check how the black spots they’d been looking forward to appeared in their palms in just a split second.

“Okay, here we go again!” said Jack, nodding as his eyes darted in the direction of the Tenth Doctor, who hurriedly strode over to his immortal friend to stand side to side with him.

The singing started immediately afterwards.

“Come on, it’s our turn now,” the Eleventh Doctor said to Clara. Putting his hand on her back and pushing her gently, he led her to the table on which lay the objects she had previously been studying in the company of Captain Jack Harkness. The Doctor inspected the small and abominable artefacts on display with the light of his sonic screwdriver, which became fixed as it reached a particularly repugnant one.

“We could use those needle-nose pliers on the corner,” he told Clara.

“I can’t see any needle-nose pliers on any of the corners, Doctor,” she said, her voice sober.

“Well, I can,” he said. “Over there. Upper left-hand corner.”

“You mean that thing with a crocodile head?” asked Clara, pointing in its direction.

“Yes, that one. It’s got tiny but very sharp teeth in its mouth,” he added, waving his fingers. “Can you see them?”

Clara narrowed her eyes, trying to get a proper view of the crocodile teeth.

“Okay!” she replied with resignation. “Let’s do it! But just so you know, Doctor, I’m so not going to enjoy this.”

“Believe me, Clara, neither am I.”

The Doctor held her hand in his in an attempt to reassure her, and the eeriness of the gasps and the giggles that had just started to escape the Tenth Doctor’s mouth made Clara only squeeze it harder.

Their gazes and their attention were suddenly diverted to the opposite side of the chamber the moment the creature reappeared by emerging out of the bucket. She twirled around once she had risen high enough for her head to almost touch the ceiling, but she stopped still as soon as her eyes pinpointed the two men she had come looking for. The Eleventh Doctor and Clara saw her feet descend onto the ground leisurely and her head tilt to the left as she slowly approached Jack and the Tenth Doctor.

The sight of men such as the Tenth Doctor and Captain Jack Harkness as they hypnotically paraded towards the creature had suddenly turned into something Clara believed she wouldn’t easily forget. Captain Jack Harkness was drowning in tears, desperately reaching for a luminous human shape that his mind, in its present demented state, probably believed to be its salvation. The temperature of her blood dropped dramatically, however, the moment she looked at the Tenth Doctor. His eyes were so widely opened that she had the distressing impression they might actually fall out of their sockets. A creepy smile had spread across his face, and his neck muscles had tightened so much that it seemed to her they were on the point of breaking. He looked so much like a lunatic that, for a moment, she feared their decision to cross realities might have irreparable consequences on his
The Doctor and Clara watched with a feeling of helplessness when Jack and the Tenth Doctor were finally turned into dust upon simply brushing their fingertips against the sirens’. However, unfortunately for Clara, she would soon find evidence that things might just be about to get even worse.

“Doctor,” she said, studying every detail in her Doctor’s face intensely, no matter how small, as he kept looking at the creature. “What’s wrong?”

The question took the Eleventh Doctor completely by surprise. He immediately took his eyes off the orange-glowing alien that was wearing the face of his cherished friend Amelia Pond to fix them on the bright brown light in the gaze of Clara Oswald, his impossible and splendid girl. Perceiving the profound uneasiness that her big round eyes were unable to hide, it hit him that the concern he had heard in her question couldn’t have been any more earnest.

“I always know,” Clara had said to him not long before. And indeed, she always did.

“I’ve seen you meet aliens many times,” she went on, “but you’ve never acted like this before. You’re always impressed by how astonishing they are or how beautiful they look, but not now... I know you’ve met the siren before, but still... This is so not like you, to look at her with sadness instead of admiration and wonder.”

Touché, the Doctor thought.

His hand was still holding hers as he kept looking at her in silence. The sadness wouldn’t go from his eyes any time soon, that much he knew, but the tender smile he gave her had somehow made him feel relieved in a comforting sort of way.

Without letting go of her hand, the Doctor wrapped his free arm around her neck and, letting his chin rest on her head, he held her close to him in a tight embrace.

“Clara,” he whispered. “My Clara. If I didn’t have you, where would I be?”

“Up on cloud number nine, as usual,” she replied casually, trying to make the fact that there was a siren from outer space singing an enchanting song right there beside them a little bit less alarming.

“I know that face, Clara,” he said finally, stroking her head. “The siren’s. I know it very well. I used to see it every day, a long time ago. Long before I met you.”

“Whose face is it?” Clara asked.

“My friend’s.”

“And where is she now?”

“In a place where I can never see her again.”

The Doctor removed his arm from around her neck and pulled back just what little was necessary for him to be able to keep eye contact.

“And why does the siren look like her?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know.”

“Cause there’s no way for that thing to really be your friend, and I really mean your friend, as in
flesh and bone, and also the secret the Queen’s been keeping all along, right?”

For lack of time and also because of an overdose of feeling, the Doctor’s brain had not even considered that possibility.

“Much as I wish there was, I’m afraid the odds of that being true are really very small,” he told her.

“Let’s wait no more then,” she told him sweetly. “Let’s find out why she’s wearing your friend’s face, shall we?”

Clara squeezed his hand again, and the Doctor nodded gently before he let go of hers and turned to the table. Stretching his arm, he reached for the crocodile shears on the corner, and once he’d grabbed them, he held them in front of her face. Looking at one another’s eyes just one more time, each of them lifted an index and directed it to one of the crocodile’s jaws. Having pricked their fingers with those tiny but unbelievably sharp teeth, the Doctor immediately put the torture device back on the table and held Clara’s hand again. Then, they both turned to face the siren, who had patiently been waiting for them to consummate the action that would take them to that other reality with her.

Before their minds started to lose their grip on their own reality, the Doctor looked back at Clara, and smiling softly, he said the only thing that always plucked up under similar circumstances.

“Geronimo!”

She smiled back at him and repeated that word herself.

*****

The images of the events that had taken place while in the torture chamber lingered in their minds from the moment they started to regain consciousness, and as soon as Jack, the Doctors and Clara woke up, they noticed something that none of them, not even the Eleventh Doctor, had anticipated in the slightest.

All around them there were children laughing, and the echo of their laughter seemed to impregnate the air on the other side.

They tried to open their eyes but immediately shut them again as the incandescent light of the reality they were now in unexpectedly blinded them all. When they tried again, they protected their eyes by either putting a hand over them or by opening them slowly so that their pupils would gradually adapt to the light. Eventually, they managed to take a look at their surroundings, and each of them found the place they were now in to look a little bit too much like the Tower of London to really be a spaceship. On and on as the Eleventh Doctor had been going about mirrors and windows, there were none to be seen at all. The room was infinitely bigger than the torture chamber or the Zygons’ lair. Two lines of columns that seemed to form a central passage helped to create the effect that it was divided into three completely different sections. No torches or candles could be found anywhere, but they were not necessary.

None of them could ever have imagined that they would show up in the middle of what appeared to be a heap of gold in the shape of coins and bars and countless jewels of all possible shapes and sizes, and the light that bathed the place in its entirety seemed to be emerging from the gold itself. Flanked by the four columns that stood in the exact centre of the room, a long piece of red velvet spread across the floor, and what they saw on top of it left them all as breathless as the myriad of gold treasures to be found all around them. Numerous crowns and golden orbs and golden sceptres with innumerable pearls and all sorts of precious stones embedded in them, a golden flask in the
shape of an eagle, a golden salt container with the shape of a castle which also counted with a surprising number of encrusted jewels, stunning diamond and sapphire and ruby rings, gold bracelets with colourful and delicate engravings, silver-gilt spoons and plates occasionally set with pearls, golden spurs, swords holstered in the most ornate scabbards any of them had ever seen... They were all being exhibited on top of that place of honour in the room, and to their left, there was a majestic wooden chair embellished with golden drawings. It was a throne without the shadow of a doubt, although its peaked back was hidden underneath another surprising and overpowering object – a majestic robe in golden cloth onto which roses, thistles and shamrocks had been embroidered.

“But… This is wrong,” the Eleventh Doctor muttered almost imperceptibly. “We should be inside a spaceship or a sickbay, so why are we here? Why are we looking at a treasure?”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, Doctors,” said Jack, “but even if this really is a spaceship, I think these are the Crown Jewels.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong too, Doctors,” said Clara, “but even if this really is a spaceship, it looks pretty much like St. John’s Chapel.”

“St. John’s Chapel?” asked Jack.

“The oldest church in London, Captain,” Clara told him, “and it happens to be in the Tower of London.”

The Doctors’ eyebrows shot up with the instant realisation that both Jack and Clara were absolutely right.

“What’s going on here?” muttered the Tenth Doctor.

From behind the sublime wooden chair then came the childish laughter children they had heard upon waking up from her reality-crossing experience. Then, out of the blue, two very young boys who couldn’t be much older than ten or eleven emerged from underneath the robe and started to run and run in circles around the throne, laughing as merrily as they could while playing with the swords they were wielding. Both children were impeccably dressed, the one that looked slightly taller was wearing purplish blue velvet clothes – a tunic and a long robe –, and the other, who was probably slightly younger, dark green velvet ones – a stuffed doublet, a short cloak, and a stuffed trunk-hose. They were also wearing blunt shoes and black stockings, and their stiff-brimmed hats covered their little golden and light brown heads.

“Who are you?” asked Jack, as tears started to well in his eyes.

None of the children seemed to be able to hear him or see them, but someone else had distinctly done both.

“Don’t you know, sir?”

Darting their eyes in the direction the voice had come from, the Doctors and his two companions saw Edward de Vere, smiling as he had never smiled at all since they had met him. Behind him was the creature, to whom he immediately turned. She started singing again, only this time her song failed to be hypnotic, but even so, Edward kept listening to her attentively.

“Oh, what’s this now? Have they suddenly become besties?” asked the Tenth Doctor, raising his upper lip with disdain, while the Eleventh Doctor decidedly strode beside the Earl and the creature.

“Can you understand what she’s saying?” he desperately asked Edward.
“Yes sir,” he replied. “And yet, I cannot recognize the language she is speaking, but nonetheless I seem to be able to understand her. In fact, sir, she has just said that she remembers you.”

“Why has she taken that form?” the Doctor asked gravely. “Ask her!”

“I beg your pardon, sir?”

“Why has she taken that form?” he repeated, now infuriated. “That face, it doesn’t belong to her, so why did she take it? You ask her that!”

The creature resumed her song again, her melancholic eyes now set on the Doctor.

“She says it belonged to someone she once met,” Edward translated as he turned to her. “Someone brave and strong… Someone who only wanted to protect and look after her loved ones and would never give up. Someone… Someone like her.”

“What?” the Doctor muttered. He narrowed his eyes and kept looking at the siren, trying to understand.

“Her name is Melusina, sir,” said Edward, “and her story has been commonplace in our mythology for centuries, Doctor, but us, humans… We just got it wrong!”

“And what’s that story?” asked Clara, right behind them.

“Oh, I’ve heard that legend…,” said the Tenth Doctor, frowning. “Melusina was a water deity who lived in a river, and a young count fell in love with her when he heard her sing. They got married and had children, but then one day he discovered that she was a siren and rejected her, and that was when she disappeared…”

“He had married her and had children with her, and he hadn’t notices that she was a siren?” asked Jack with a smirk.

“Legend has it she had human legs when she was out of water, Jack,” the Tenth Doctor explained to him. “Have you not seen that film with Tom Hanks and Daryl Hannah?”

“However,” said the Eleventh Doctor, turning to Clara, “after she left her husband’s castle, still she was seen there every evening, entering her children’s rooms to spend the night looking after them…”

“With all due respect, Doctors,” said Edward, making him wake up from his daydream, “that’s not the end of her story. Legend has it that Melusina is in fact an ancestor of the Kings and Queens of England.”

“Now’s when I’m completely lost again,” said Clara.

“In the days of the Wars of the Roses, my lady,” Edward went on, motioning towards her, “when the Houses of Lancaster and York were fighting for the throne of England, King Edward IV married a commoner, Elizabeth Woodville, the Queen’s great-grandmother.”

“Oh,” the Doctors replied in unison, whilst the historical events that Edward was narrating to them got pictured in their minds.

“Elizabeth Woodville, my lady, was one of Melusina’s descendants,” Edward explained. “The Luxemburgs, her family on her mother’s side, always claimed the mythological water goddess to be their ancestor.”
“Except that she wasn’t a mythological goddess at all,” said Tenth Doctor. “She just happened to
be an alien, and for some reason, really fond of reflections.”

“I still don’t understand,” said Clara, looking up to Edward. “You said that Melusina wanted to
protect her family, so what’s she doing here now? Does the Queen need protection?”

“No, my lady,” Edward replied. And then, lifting a hand and pointing to the children who were still
happily playing around a throne with their swords, he went on. “But those two children do – they
always have! And she has been their most devoted guardian for a very long time.”

“But who are they?” asked Jack, turning her head to them as did Clara and the Doctors.

Silence filled the room for an instant until the truth dawned, first of all, upon the two Time Lords.

“Oh no, they can’t be…” said the Tenth Doctor taking a deep breath, his eyes narrowing and his
mouth agape.

“Oh yes, they are,” replied the Eleventh Doctor, whose features mirrored his.

“Oh no, they can’t be!” the Tenth Doctor repeated, shaking his head.

“Oh yes they are!” the Eleventh Doctor repeated in his turn, with a grin as immense as the ones
that would suddenly find the way to his mouth whenever he discovered something otherworldly.

“Doctors, Captain, my lady Clara,” said Edward solemnly, “you’re seeing before you His Majesty
King Edward V and his brother Prince Richard, Duke of York.”

“What?!?” exclaimed Jack.

“Edward and Richard as in… ‘The Princes in the Tower’?” asked Clara, lowering her head and
knitting her brows together.

“The very ones… Oh!” exclaimed the Eleventh Doctor. At long last, full realisation had hit him.
Melusina had taken the form of that woman who once signed a contract with her, that woman who,
like her, had only wanted to look after someone she loved more than anyone else in the world.
Suddenly, he felt like dancing around the room to the grandiose music that had just started to sound
inside his head.

“The Princes in the Tower!” exclaimed the Tenth Doctor, stunned. “Prince Edward, heir to the
throne, who was awaiting his coronation after the death of his father, but was locked up in the
Tower together with his brother, Prince Richard. After that, they were never seen again and
nobody ever found out what had really happened to them. And since their uncle Richard
proclaimed himself king, it’s been presumed for centuries and centuries that he had them killed.”

“That was King Richard III, my lady,” Edward added, smiling sweetly at Clara.

“I know,” she said, smiling back at him.

“The greatest murder mystery of all time…” said the Tenth Doctor in ecstasy, “and it was her!”

“She has been looking after her descendants for centuries, Doctor, ever since she was banished
from their side,” explained Edward, “and she has been here protecting the princes for over a
thousand years.”

“A thousand years! How is that even possible?” asked Jack. “You’re saying those kids are Queen
Elizabeth’s great uncles, so I reckon they must’ve disappeared over a century ago…”
“Time works in a different way when you’re in a different reality, Jack” the Tenth Doctor told his friend. “Even space does.”

“And this place, Melusina said, is full of temporal distortions,” added Edward.

“It is… It definitely is!” exclaimed Clara, as the memory of Professor River Song saying those exact words to her came back to her mind.

“Melusina has also said that she has tried many times to take the princes with her to the stars, sirs, and each of those times, to no avail,” Edward added.

“And I think I know why,” said the Tenth Doctor. “Like the walls of a labyrinth, those temporal distortions must’ve suddenly built up around her spaceship, blocking its way out. She must’ve been trapped here ever since, jumping from one reality to another, and another, and another, for over a thousand years…”

“But the children… How can they be a thousand years old and still be children?” asked Clara.

“Because she put them into stasis,” said the Eleventh Doctor. “That’s what she always does to the people she takes with her. It’s the only way she can save those who are about to die.”

“So… She truly saved them,” said Clara, her voice full of emotion. “Whoever was trying to kill them, she saved them from their deaths.”

“That was what she said, my lady,” Edward told her.

“And what about the people who disappeared from the Tower?” asked Jack. “Where are they?”

“They are also here, Captain,” Edward told him. “I have seen them. They are all safe.”

“We can help you get back home,” said the Tenth Doctor, sauntering towards Melusina. “We can help lower those temporal walls surrounding your spaceship so that you can go home.”

“Where exactly is your home?” asked the Eleventh Doctor, narrowing his eyes and crossing his arms on his chest as he drank her in.

“She said she is an Aurean, sir,” Edward told him, “although the meaning of that word escapes me I am afraid. Still, she mentioned being inside a star…”

“What sort of a star?” asked the Tenth Doctor.

“A dying star, sir.”

“A supernova… Of course!” exclaimed the Eleventh Doctor while his lips curled into a smile. “An Aurean… She’s an Aurean! Of course! What else could she be? Isn’t she just fascinating?”

“Doctor,” said Clara, her heart loving the way he was grinning now that he was feeling utterly spellbound, but her brain plainly wanting to know more, “could you please elaborate?”

“When a star is dying, Clara,” he expeditiously explained, his eyes still locked with Melusina’s, “gold is made inside of it.”

“Gold?” asked Jack.

“Yes,” the Tenth Doctor went on. “Gold which, when the star finally explodes, is scattered all around the universe and left floating free in space.”
“That’s her home after the supernova explosion,” continued the Eleventh Doctor. “The whole universe!”

“But before that explosion,” said the Tenth Doctor, “something is born out of that gold.”

“And that would be, the Aureans themselves,” exclaimed the Eleventh Doctor, who at that point seemed to be enjoying his own explanation more than anybody else in the room. “They are particles of gold that literally come to life, and they come to life for a very simple reason – to look after the dying star.”

“Looks like they’re nurses after all, aren’t they?” the Tenth Doctor concluded, darting his proud eyes to his future self and smiling.

“Then all that’s left for us to do now is help her get out of here and back to the stars,” said Jack.

“Yes,” said the Eleventh Doctor. “But now she needs to understand there are terms and conditions to do that.” He then turned to Melusina, and staring into her eyes, which were now identical to those of his beloved Amelia Pond, he made his meaning as clear as possible. “You can take the princes with you, Melusina. They’re your family, your descendants, and no one else on this planet has earned the right to look after them more than you have. But the others… I know you mean well, but you can’t take them.”

Looking at the Doctor in a silence that was most unusual for a singing alien creature, Melusina reached out her hand to him.

“We need to sign another contract?” asked her the Eleventh Doctor.

“Another, you said?” asked the Tenth Doctor.

“A consent form, more like,” replied the Doctor. “She will let the others stay if one of us takes full responsibility.”

“But we can’t do that, Chinny,” replied the Tenth Doctor. “There must be other things we can do, but we definitely mustn’t do that.”

“But they’ve got families that love them...” told him the Eleventh Doctor. “She’ll take them with her if we don’t do it.”

“But they are likely to be tortured and some might even be executed if we do!” shouted the Tenth Doctor.

“Well, here he comes again… The rule-observing Doctor!” said the older Time Lord with sarcasm.

“I’m not observing the rules this time, Chinny!” said the Tenth Doctor, visibly angry. “In fact, observing the rules is the opposite of what I’m doing right now… I’m coming up with a plan!”

“Oh yes, some plan you’ve got!” the Eleventh Doctor reproached him. “Sending them off to outer space, away from their homes and their loved ones!”

“Then tell me, how is that not better than what’s really awaiting them if they stay?”

“What I’m saying, Sandshoes, is let’s do something about that! Ideas would certainly be most welcome!”

“Doctors, Doctors,” said Jack to everyone’s relief. They had been quarrelling practically from the
moment they got together, but now things seemed to be getting heated as Clara or Jack had not seen before. “No need to argue, Docs. Not anymore. Look!”

The Doctors took a look around and saw Clara standing right in front of Melusina. They kept looking up at each other while the palms of their right hands touched the other’s and a bright ring of a warm orange light encircled them. They both remained like that for a few seconds, until the light of the circle vanished. Then, Melusina smiled at Clara softly, which was something she had not done at all since they had met her, and Clara felt how the warmth of her terribly human gaze was her means to express her gratefulness. The magical creature’s eyes then darted to the children, who were smiling at her as they kept running up and jumping from the heaps of gold that were piled up all over the room.

Turning away from Clara, Melusina slowly floated towards the throne. Upon reaching it, she sat down, and no sooner had the two boys seen her sitting there than they ran to her. Wrapping her arms around them, she seated them on her knees and held them close to her as they hugged her and buried their shiny little faces in her long red hair.

“They’re safe now,” said Clara, whose big brown eyes had become soaked with tears as she witnessed that scene. “They’re all safe now, aren’t they?”

“Oh Clara,” muttered the Tenth Doctor, sounding as if he was absolutely out of breath, “what have you done?”
The Beast

Chapter Notes

Big big thanks to NoPondInTheForest, the best beta one could ever have, and thank you too guys as usual for your kudos! Hope you won't hate me too much by the end of this chapter...

The dazzling brightness of the golden light that enwrapped Melusina and the princes as her spaceship took them out of the Tower and set off for the cosmos caused the time travellers to get blinded once again.

When the glare and the glitter were gone, Jack, Edward, Clara and the Doctors found themselves back inside the familiar and notorious Tower torture chamber, surrounded by the atrocious instruments of torture that had previously made them all feel not only absolutely horrified, but also completely disheartened.

Their minds, however, were in a very different state this time.

Edward de Vere, the genius whose words would be remembered for centuries and centuries to come, if not as his own, as those of a William Shakespeare, had been rendered absolutely speechless by the course of events. None of his masters, he thought, could ever have even dreamed of being close to the kind of knowledge that was now there within his grasp. First it was the creature, followed by the semi-consciousness. After that, it was the new reality and the heaps of gold and jewels. Finally, there were the revelations. The two young boys had turned out to be King Edward V and his brother Richard Duke of York, the renowned princes in the Tower, but the creature herself had made the foundations of both mythology and the green-eyed Doctor’s knowledge of aliens shake when she told Edward that she was Melusina, a water goddess whom legend had described as an omen of death. She had, in fact, done nothing but protect life ever since the day she had been born, as she turned out to be an Aurean, a luminescent creature from a species of nurses born out of the gold that’s formed inside dying stars. In the words of the brown-eyed Doctor, Melusina was the motherly daughter of a supernova.

Captain Jack Harkness, who could do nothing but stare at the Earl of Oxford, couldn’t help but think how the awestruck look on his face might as well stay with him until the end of his life.

Meanwhile, the Eleventh Doctor’s brain had not and would not stop asking questions. Clara had – and very intelligently – hinted at something right before Melusina came and carried them both hand in hand to her own magic-like reality. Now that the alien was gone, his companion’s words were coming back to him. What if she had been right, he wondered. Could that really have been the reason why Queen Elizabeth had gone through so much trouble? The conviction that some accident in time and space had brought her close to a creature she had wrongly assumed to have been a friend of the Doctor’s once, and that she could actually use that creature to hurt him and fulfil her revenge? How had she known that there was something about that creature that would make the Doctor – though maybe not the one she had intended – feel immediately drawn to her anyway? And most importantly, was that all? Because to him, it just didn’t make any sense. Just this once, could things really be that simple? Because there was something deep inside him that was trying to convince him they could not.
Clara’s features couldn’t help but show her disbelief the moment the sounds that had just become barely audible eventually reached her ears. She stood silent for a moment, refusing to believe that they were real. But had to be, didn’t they? Otherwise, why would she even hear them?

The Tenth Doctor had been dreading the moment that he knew was soon to come, and when that moment finally came, the frozen hands that had been grabbing his hearts and squeezing them hard seemed to be threatening to crush them into dust.

The bitter reality of the events the younger Time Lord had been anticipating ultimately hit them all in the form of shrieks of pain, cries of despair, and mad laughter, all of them coming from the mouths and the throats of the dozens of men and women who were now occupying the dungeons of the majestic building that had remained nearly empty until that very moment.

“No!” whispered Clara, her gaze darting from the Tenth to the Eleventh Doctor. Shaking her head as her heart sank in her chest, she went on. “No. No. No! No!” she exclaimed. “Why would Melusina put the prisoners back in their dungeons? Why didn’t she leave them somewhere else?”

Her Doctor slowly turned to her and held her hands in his.

“Because the thought of not putting them back in their cells didn’t even cross her mind, Clara,” he said, narrowing his eyes. “Because we never told her we were expecting her to get them out of the Tower in the first place.”

“So this is… My fault,” said Clara as a tear started to run down her cheek. “I should never have signed that contract, Doctor... Now they’re all back in their dungeons just because of me!”

“Clara, listen,” said the Eleventh Doctor, grabbing her by the shoulders as he held her gaze. “This is not your fault.”

“We should leave this place right now, everyone,” said Jack, motioning towards the rest of the party. “The moment everyone else in London realises the Tower’s not empty anymore, the Queen’s men will want to know why.”

“But we can’t leave now!” Clara exclaimed.

“I’m afraid we don’t really have much choice,” said the Tenth Doctor.

“No!” shouted Clara, sauntering towards him. “We can’t leave these people, Doctor! What will happen to them if we do?”

“Those people are not our concern, Clara,” he answered sluggishly, marking his words. “They never were.”

“How can you say that!” she asked helplessly.

“How can I say that?” said the Doctor, running a hand through his hair. “Look, I don’t know the ideas Chinny here has been getting into your head, Clara, but we never… And I can’t stress this enough – we don’t interfere!”

“We don’t walk away!” said Clara defiantly. “That’s what you said to me when we first met, Doctor, that we never walk away!”

“I never said that to you, Clara!” he replied, raising his forefinger menacingly before he turned it in the direction of the Eleventh Doctor. “And just in case you haven’t noticed, I’m not him!”
“Enough!” screamed a furious Eleventh Doctor. He took a few steps forward and placed himself between the Tenth Doctor and Clara, determined to put an end to their short but heated argument. Looking at his past self, he spoke in a sarcastic tone. “Using regeneration as an excuse to detach your actions from mine, Sandshoes? I may be feeling a bit sensitive these days, but under different circumstances, I would’ve thought that to be quite beneath you.”

“We just can’t do what Clara thinks we should do,” grunted the other Time Lord, infuriated.

“Oh no! Of course we shouldn’t! ‘Cause we never interfere! That’s what you always say, right?” the Eleventh Doctor went on, his voice full of sarcasm. “The universe is nothing but fixed points and people’s destinies have already been sealed, so we walk away! We never help them. We just run away and never look back. Oh, hang on! Maybe sometimes we do! Or have you forgotten Pompeii?”

“This is not Pompeii, Chinny,” replied the Tenth Doctor, nonplussed.

“Oh, isn’t it? And how? How is this not like Pompeii?” the Eleventh Doctor challenged him. “When many people might be about to die because we have messed up with something lying underneath the surface of their very lives, tell me, Sandshoes, how can this possibly not be like Pompeii?” he asked him so passionately that he accidentally spat out on more than one occasion while he was talking.

His past self had not felt intimidated by his words in the least, and in an equally ugly mood, he held his gaze in defiance, his mouth agape and his breaths short and fast.

“I’m not breaking all the laws of time and space just because you two are reckless,” he told him in a faltering voice.

It was the moment when the word ‘reckless’ reverberated in the torture chamber that Clara decided to rush out of it.

“Clara!” Jack called her out. “Clara! Where do you think you’re going? Clara!”

The Doctors turned around just in time to see Clara running away so fast that it seemed to them her life depended upon it.

“Clara! Wait!” cried the Eleventh Doctor, immediately running after her.

Captain Jack Harkness and Edward de Vere would willingly have followed the Time Lord and his companion, had they not been prevented from doing so by the Tenth Doctor walking towards them and spreading his arms in front of them.

“Jack, listen!” he said to the former Time Agent as he put his hand on his shoulder. “What you said before… You were right! We had a chance to leave this place safely, but now that chance is gone. They’ll find us soon if we stay, so take Edward away from here while you still can.”

“What? And let you three have all the fun without me?” Jack teased. “No way, Doctor! I’m not leaving you here!”

“But you must.”

“Maybe I must, but I don’t want to.”

“Jack, please!” said the Doctor, his voice now sounding desperate. “Even if nobody else does, you please listen to me! Get Edward out of this place. He should never have been a part of this, don’t
you understand? That was the reason why I brought you here! We never meant to put anyone’s life in danger.”

Jack stayed silent for a moment. The thought that his immunity to death might have been a decisive factor in granting him passage to Elizabethan England had not crossed his mind until then, but he didn’t even need a fraction of a second to understand the sense in such decision.

“Fair enough,” he replied. “Now you listen to me, Doctor. I know you, I know that face, and I know what you’re thinking, and I’ve honestly got to tell you that none of this is your fault.”

“Isn’t it, Jack?” asked the Doctor, gazing down. “Isn’t it my fault, really? Mine and mine alone?”

“Of course not!” Jack shouted in earnest. “I know you very well, Doc. I know you way better than that arm-flailing alien that’s suddenly landed from the future, and I know how this you tends to take the blame for everything that’s ever gone wrong in the universe. But you’re not to blame, Doctor! Things... They just happen! And yes, most of the times, you happen to be around ‘cause you’re trying to make them better, but sometimes you just can’t! Sometimes things are beyond all control – even yours! And it doesn’t matter how much you might try to restore order, Doctor, ‘cause order is not the only thing the universe is made of.”

“If restoring order means restoring death,” said the Doctor with defeatism, “then there’s no difference at all between order and chaos, Jack. Maybe the universe should be done with me... Or maybe... Maybe it’s me who should be done with the universe. Maybe the universe would be much better off without me.”

*****

“Hello?!” Clara kept shouting. “Remember me from the other night?! It’s me, Clara! I’ve come to get you out of here! Can you hear me?! Hello?! Are you still there?! It’s Clara Oswald, your friend! Hello?! Where are you?!”

Clara had spent the last few minutes running like mad along the countless corridors inside the Tower of London. Adrenaline seemed to have taken over her body, her brain, and her senses for a while as she devoted her every effort, no matter how big or small, to which had now become her single quest – finding the young girl who had been locked up in the same dungeon as her two nights before. Soon, however, there was no adrenaline rush that could prevent her from seeing the very real and terrified faces or hear the cries of help of the people that had just been magically sent back to their cells.

“Excuse me, my lady!” she heard someone call out to her. “Have you seen my sister?”

Clara stopped in her tracks and turned to gaze at the young man who had just spoken to her from behind the bars of the small window in the door of the dungeon he had been shut in. Taking a few steps backwards, Clara walked towards the door and felt her knees were failing her the moment she saw there were over twenty other men locked up in the same dungeon as him, all equally filthy and desperate. Clenching her teeth, Clara focused all her attention on the man who had called out to her and studied his features carefully, trying to find some kind of resemblance between him and the girl she’d seen in her own dungeon. Unfortunately for him, she found none.

“Have you seen my sister, please?” the young man asked again. “Is she still in her dungeon?”

But physical resemblances meant nothing, Clara thought. Maybe she had really seen his sister, but maybe she hadn’t. And how could she say to that poor man at all?
Clara smiled at him sadly, because even if her heart was breaking inside her, she had just decided to leave him behind. To keep on running. And now, the Eleventh Doctor was getting really close to her.

“Sir, excuse me!” the same young man cried to him. “Have you seen my sister, sir? Is she still in her dungeon?”

“Clara! Wait!” the Doctor shouted, too busy chasing his friend to pay any attention to the young man who was desperately trying to find out what the whereabouts of his sister were. “I’m with you on this, okay?”

“I’ve got to find that girl, Doctor!” she said as she kept on running.

“I know! And I know you will! Oi! Listen to me!” The Doctor’s long legs were suddenly running at an arm’s length of her shorter ones, and finally being able to reach her, he grabbed her by the arm and forced her to turn and face him. “Listen! I’m here with you, Clara, and I’m with you all the way! You don’t have to run away from me!”

“It’s me that she’s running away from, Chinny, not you,” said Tenth Doctor, who had been running after them, as he caught them both completely by surprise.

“I know I can’t set them all free, Doctor,” said Clara, freeing her arm from her Doctor’s firm grip and taking a few quick and decisive steps closer towards the younger Time Lord, “but if I can’t do that, please let me at least set her free!”

New tears started to run down her face as she said that.

“You don’t understand what it means to create a paradox, do you?” the Tenth Doctor cut in, his eyes darting from her to his future self.

“Right now, I couldn’t care any less about paradoxes, Doctor,” she said in a rebellious tone. “Right now I just care about a young girl who’s locked up in one of these dungeons, who’s terribly scared, and who only wants to go home, and home is where I’m going to take her even if it’s the last thing I ever do!”

“I’m sorry Clara,” suddenly said the Eleventh Doctor. Clara’s heart skipped a beat when she heard those words, and she immediately turned around with the intention of finding out what might have possibly made the Doctor say them. What she saw then was the Eleventh Doctor standing at the very end of the corridor, right in front of the only dungeon out of all the ones they had found whose door, unlike the doors of all the dungeons they had run past, had been left open wide. Getting closer and looking in, she recognized it soon enough. It was early morning by then, so the room was fairly lighter, and it was absolutely empty except for the bed, which looked exactly the way it did when Clara got up from it two nights before. Only one of its sides was unmade – the one on which she had been sleeping. On the other side, the coverlet looked just a bit untidy. To Clara’s mind, everything seemed to suggest that the girl had not slept a wink after she left, or even the night after.

Clara took a few steps inside the room and stopped right in front of the bed, and the Eleventh Doctor walked right behind her.

The Tenth Doctor, however, motioned towards the window, and what he saw upon looking down made his hearts sink even more, if by now that was actually possible.

He wished he were completely wrong, but being a time traveller who had had a soft spot for Planet
Earth for nearly a millennia, he knew that, in the days of the Tudors, scaffolds were usually built overnight, and he also knew that whenever there was a crowd gathered in front of one, it was because there would be an execution. Everything seemed to indicate that someone’s head was about to be separated from the rest of their body by the stroke of an axe on their neck.

Then, all of a sudden, a nearby bell started to toll.

“The bells of St John are ringing,” he said absent-mindedly.

Clara, who had successfully managed to hold back her tears until that moment, suddenly just couldn’t stand it any longer and broke down, and the Eleventh Doctor, who had remained right behind her, walked the few steps that separated him from his friend and held her in a tight embrace. Clara didn’t say a word. Her mouth had run dry just as much as her eyes had got wet. She just clung to the Doctor’s tunic and kept on crying against his chest.

The Tenth Doctor was spared the burden of telling her what his eyes had witnessed by the sudden interruption of Jack, Edward, and Clara herself, who appeared within a flash of white light. He had completely forgotten, but as soon as he saw his three friends suddenly emerging from the recent past, he realised this had to be the moment they had mentioned upon reuniting with them outside “The Mermaid Tavern”, when Jack explained how they had eventually managed to get to them after many failed attempts by briefly travelling to the future and asking where he and the other Doctor had been.

That was exactly what happened next.

“Doctors,” said Jack, who looked quite surprised to see them, “we need your help! Where were you the morning after you lost Clara at St Paul’s?”

The Tenth Doctor stayed silent for a moment. The thought came to his mind that maybe, if there was still a glimmer of sense left inside him, he should just warn them to never go back to the Tower under any circumstances so that none of this would now be happening, but he didn’t. He just didn’t. He simply gave them the information they had come looking for.

“The Mermaid Tavern,” he replied, not being able to meet none of their gazes.

“Irony upon irony,” said the Eleventh Doctor sadly from his place right behind him.

At that point, Edward said something to Clara, but the Tenth Doctor didn’t even take the trouble to show any interest in what it might have been. A few seconds later, the past versions of their friends were gone, and he kept wishing they had never come in the first place.

“I’ve failed her, Doctor!” present Clara sobbed against his future self’s chest. “I told her I’d come back for her, and now she’s gone!”

“We’ll keep looking, Clara!” said the Eleventh Doctor, trying his best to comfort her. “Melusina abducted every last person in this building and then put them back here before she left, right? She must be in a different dungeon, that’s all. We’re going to find her!”

It was at that very moment that a woman’s voice was heard inside that room, but whose voice it would turn out to be they hadn’t seen coming at all.

“That’s a most hopeful deduction, sir, but as your sovereign, it is my duty to inform you that it should just merely be reduced to the category of wishful thinking.”

The Doctors and Clara turned around and saw Queen Elizabeth herself and her Secretary of State,
Sir Robert Cecil, coming into the dungeon. Behind them, their guards were holding Jack and Edward prisoners by pressing sword blades against their necks.

“Can you not hear that sound?” the Queen went on, smiling brightly. “It is coming from Bell Tower! It is the sound the bell makes minutes before an execution, my dear,” she added, her eyes darting to Clara. “And today’s execution is a very special one – it is the first after a whole month! Oh, I am sorry that you are not fond of executions, my sweet little girl,” she said when Clara and the Eleventh Doctor looked at her enraged. “Your young friend, the one that used to occupy this room, she was not fond of executions either, so I thought, why should I make her witness one when she could be the whole reason for one herself? Am I not merciful?” she asked between giggles.

“Most prisoners are never granted such graces! I have to say, though, she did not like the idea very much, but at least she shall never have to see one from that window over there!” She then looked at the window, and widening her eyes in fake surprise, she exclaimed. “Oh, dear god! What is that sight my eyes are seeing? Can that be my dear husband, the Doctor?”

“Elizabeth, stop it!” muttered the Tenth Doctor.

“Oh, it can! What an unexpected surprise! It is my cherished husband indeed! How good it is to see you, my love! It fills me with such joy! After nearly forty years!” She took a few steps towards him and kissed him passionately while the Eleventh Doctor grimaced with disgust. “We should celebrate, my darling, do you not think so?”

Queen Elizabeth then looked at the Eleventh Doctor and Clara before she turned to look at Jack and Edward, as she pretended to be waiting for an answer that never came with a false smile on her face. Her spread smiling lips then twisted to acquire the commanding quality of a tyrannical ruler as her head nodded almost imperceptibly in the direction of Robert Cecil.

“Guards!” shouted Robert Cecil. “Lock up these men and that woman right now!”

“No!” the Queen suddenly screamed at her loyal henchmen. “No, Robert! I have just had a better idea…” Then, turning to the Tenth Doctor, she added. “Guards! You are to escort my dear husband and I to Tower Green, where we shall take the best seats, so that my dear husband shall not miss a single detail of the execution!”

“Elizabeth, I beg you,” Edward said to her in spite of the cold blade pressing against his throat, “you cannot do that.”

“Of course I can,” she replied, turning to him. “I can do what I want! You should know that better than anyone else, Master Shakespeare...,” she added, repressing a giggle.

“You don’t know what these most remarkable men have just done, Elizabeth,” Edward added, refusing to give up trying. “If only you knew, you would not be trying to punish them like this!”

“Shut up, Edward, or I shall see to it that once that insolent girl’s head is no longer above her shoulders, you shall be next in line!”

“Leave him alone, Elizabeth!” shouted the Tenth Doctor. “I’m going with you.”

“What?” said the Eleventh Doctor, grabbing Prior Him by the arm. “Sandshoes! Have you gone completely insane? You can’t do that!”

“Make sure all of you leave this place safe and sound, Chinny. That’s all I ask of you,” said the Tenth Doctor, taking his future self’s hand off his arm.

“But what will happen to you?” the Eleventh Doctor asked him.
“I don’t know, and I don’t care,” the younger Time Lord replied.


“Nothing will happen to me, Chinny!” the Tenth Doctor shouted at him. “Isn’t that always our curse?”

“I’m waiting, my love,” interrupted Queen Elizabeth, a devilish smile on her face.

“Please go,” the Tenth Doctor nearly whispered. “I’m begging you. Can’t you see? None of this would’ve happened if it wasn’t for me... This is all my fault! You and Clara should never have come here, and I’ll never forgive myself if something happens to her – or Edward.”

“Doctor,” said Clara, getting closer to him and taking his hand in hers. “Doctor I’m so sorry!”

“I’m really sorry too, Clara,” he said, smiling softly as his eyes locked with hers. “I’m really sorry this me has disappointed you.”

“Don’t say that!” she exclaimed.

“But it has, hasn’t it? Well, don’t worry!” he said, a sad smile appearing on his face. “Good news is I’ll make up to you for all this in the future. I promise!”

“If you’re taking him with you, Your Majesty,” suddenly said the Eleventh Doctor, turning to the Queen herself, “then we’re all going with him.”

“No, sir, you are not,” said the Queen. “He is coming with me. The rest of you can go straight to hell for all I care! I only want him.”

Queen Elizabeth reached for the Tenth Doctor, who crossed his arms over his chest, refusing to take her hand before his friends’ astonished eyes.

“Well, he who laughs last…,” Queen Elizabeth said then, taking the hand he had refused to the back of her neck and squeezing it hard. “Well, my dear, it’s time to defrock! Provided of course that you are actually wearing real garments underneath that stupid tunic of yours.”

It didn’t take the Queen long to understand that the Tenth Doctor was determined to disobey each and every single one of her orders. What the Doctor had yet to learn was that a simple snapping of her fingers was all her guards needed to press their swords tighter against Jack’s and Edward’s necks, so that he would have to give in. And so, the Doctor slowly took off his tunic and threw it to the ground.

“Shall we?” the Queen said then, leading the way with her hand and inviting him to walk at the front. Her guards followed right behind him with their swords aimed at his back, except for the ones that were still retaining Jack and Edward. Before she left the room, Queen Elizabeth walked close to Jack, and pressing her body against his, she kissed him passionately before she spoke. “Such a shame that you came to me at such an inconvenient time, Lord Boeshane. But please, do come back whenever you wish! I shall, until then, be thinking of the most appropriate manner to greet you when you do... What would you prefer, my lord, the scaffold or the stake?”

“None of them would really make much difference, Your Majesty…,” said Jack, winking at her as he always did.

But Queen Elizabeth was not listening or looking at him anymore. Her eyes were now locked with Edward’s, and if Jack still understood human emotions, then it was plain to see they were looking
at each other with deep regret.

“No kiss goodbye for you, Edward,” the Queen said, “that time is long gone, I am afraid.”

“Exactly as it should be, Your Majesty,” replied Edward.

One more snapping of the Queen’s fingers made her soldiers free the two men they had been holding captive until then, and right after they did, they left, leaving the Eleventh Doctor, Clara, Jack and Edward alone in the dungeon.

“Oh, thank goodness!” said the Doctor. “I couldn’t wait to get rid of this tunic either!” And after saying that, he quickly took it off.

“What has exactly happened here, sir?” asked Edward immediately afterwards. “Why has Queen Elizabeth taken the other Doctor with her?”

“I don’t know,” Jack told him, “but we can’t just let her have her way with him. We must help him!”

“Some woman, huh?” said the Eleventh Doctor. “That’s not the Elizabeth I met at all… That’s a monster! She’s more cruel and tyrannical than ever she was, and this…,” he said, flailing his arms about before he suddenly stood still. After a moment during which his brow furrowed and his thoughts were gathered together, he started to nervously pace about the room. “This just doesn’t make sense… Does it?” Clara, Jack and Edward silently looked at him as his footsteps led him to the side of the bed that still looked almost intact and watched him sit down. “No matter how casual or accidental her appearance here might have seemed – none of this has happened by chance!” At this point, the Doctor took the small pillow that was lying on his side of the bed and pressed it hard against his chest, hoping that it would help him think more clearly. “If this really is her frightful revenge, then there’s still something I’m missing! What is it, Doctor? What? What? What?” After saying those words, the Doctor closed his eyes and lowered his head, feeling the cold white fabric of the case before he buried his head on the pillow.

That was when he noticed its unmistakable scent.

The Doctor quickly opened his eyes and raised his head. He lowered his gaze to take a look at the pillow, and drawing it close to his nose, he started to sniff.

“Doctor, what are you doing?” asked Clara.

But the Doctor never answered. He remained sitting on the bed and sniffing at the pillow for a few more seconds until he suddenly jumped up. Jack, Clara and Edward saw him practically dance around the room as he inspected what little there was to be inspected in it since, except for the bed and the four of them, there was nothing else at all.

But there had to be something!

He knew there had to be something so he didn’t stop looking. He turned back to the bed, and grabbing the coverlet hard with both hands, pulled energetically until he stripped the bed off of it. Then he did the same with the white sheets, and as there still was nothing to be found, he removed the cases from the pillows. Once again, he saw nothing, so he moved to the side of the bed where he had just been sitting, and crouching down, he pushed the mattress, with the intention of throwing it to the floor. He never got to do that, though, since he had only pushed it just a little when something that had been lying underneath it suddenly caught his attention. He drew his face close to it and saw threads of wool in many different shades of red, blue, green, brown, orange,
purple, and yellow.

And pink.

The Doctor grabbed those threads and pulled, and the unveiling of the object they turned out to be the fringe of made his eyes and mouth gape, even more so when he finally took it entirely out from underneath the mattress. What he found himself holding in his hands was a really long multi-coloured woollen scarf – and one he had seen before. One that, in fact, he had never been able to forget, even if almost five hundred years had passed since the last time he’d laid eyes on it.

The first time he had seen it had been during his leather jacket days. Particularly on the day he and a couple of friends landed the TARDIS in Cardiff to have it refuelled on the rift.

The last time had been around five years later, when the dying body of the Time Lord who had just been forced to leave the room in the company of Queen Elizabeth I and her men had found the courage and the strength to make one last visit to a friend would never forget. A companion he had dearly loved.

On both occasions, that very scarf had been wrapped around Rose Tyler’s neck.

And right now, the Doctor really wished he were wrong, but there was only one reason that could satisfactorily explain why he had just found that scarf under the mattress on top of that prison bed. Unless this was all just a big mistake and someone could immediately prove him to be completely wrong, Rose Tyler was about to lose her head on the scaffold.

Holding on firmly to Rose’s beautiful scarf and carrying her unmistakable scent still within his nostrils, the Doctor stood up, adjusted his bow tie, and then did that thing he would always do whenever Rose Tyler was involved.

Run.
The Falcon

Chapter Notes

As always, big big thank you my dear friend and beta NoPondInTheForest. Baby, you're the best! :-D

“I hope you are enjoying the view, dear husband,” said Queen Elizabeth to the Tenth Doctor. They were both sitting under the marquee in the royal tribune, which had been put up outside the White Tower for the occasion, and the crestfallen Time Lord had not dared look up from the moment he had taken seat.

“Shut up,” he muttered, his conscience-stricken eyes fixed on the scaffold right opposite.

“There! Is it not delightful?” she asked sarcastically. “We have not seen each other in decades, my love, still there is no difference between us and a properly married couple!”

“This,” said the Doctor, marking that word as he turned to her. “This was your plan from the very beginning, wasn’t it?”

“I am afraid I do not understand what you mean, dear husband,” she replied coolly.

“Don’t play any games with me, Elizabeth,” said the Doctor bitterly. “Not anymore.”

“Well,” said Queen Elizabeth, “if by ‘this’ you mean ‘this which is happening in front of you’, my dear, then the answer is, yes! ‘This’ was all part of my design! But from the very beginning? What do you mean, Doctor? The very beginning of what? Our marriage? Because as far as I can remember, my darling, it is utterly impossible to discern its beginning from its end.”

“What about what’s just happened in the Tower? Huh?” asked the Doctor, suddenly on the warpath. “You orchestrated it all, didn’t you? You somehow knew of the existence of that creature and you set a trap for her. By keeping her captive you’d create the perfect mystery ‘cause you knew she would abduct all the prisoners, and how can a place like the Tower of London ever be empty, especially in the Tudor era? And not only are you wicked, Your Majesty, you’re also very clever!, ‘cause you knew I’d come no matter how many warnings you might have sent against it. In fact, you wanted me to come! You wanted me to be the one who’d set that alien free and send all those people she had almost set free back to their prisons! Now that I’ve done so, your bloody cycle of torture and death can run its course again. That’s what you wanted to do to me, right? Set fire to the shelter those people had found and lead them back to their deaths… ‘Cause that’s all they are to you, right? Nothing more than collateral damage… You’ve turned me into a murderer, Your Majesty! Congratulations!” he shouted, blowing a gasket. “And now you’ve brought me here so that you can rejoice in your success!”

“Do not flatter yourself, Doctor. You were a murderer long before I met you.” As she spoke, Queen Elizabeth’s features were disfigured by the tension in her facial muscles. “As for that creature, I did know that some rather other-worldly events would sometimes take place in the Tower since the days of the reign of my great uncle King Richard. Unfortunately for you, Doctor, that means that I did not plan any of that! To be completely honest, I was never very interested in the particulars. I knew that it would help find you though, and I also knew that, were the prisoners to reappear in
their dungeons, it could only mean one thing – that you had finally come back to my kingdom! But procuring that creature, or the consequences of her actions? I am sorry to disappoint you, my love, but that was never a part of my plan. And now, I must confess I feel quite stupid. I actually wish it had been!”

“What on earth do you mean?” asked the Doctor, narrowing his eyes.

“Revenge, my love,” she answered, smiling broadly. “The way you have described it, Doctor… That was perfection, and I so profoundly regret that you should have been the one to come up with all those wonderful ideas and that I was not! Can you imagine? The Doctor, the savior of worlds, turned into a murderer… By his own wife! Oh my goodness! How wonderful that would have been! Maybe the next time? Provided, of course, that I allow you to survive this…”

“Elizabeth, you’re sick,” said the Doctor with a mixture of sorrow and repulsion.

“I shall not deny that, my love. I may have been all my life, in fact, since I was a little girl! But what if you were sicker than I am? In your mind I have made a mass murderer of you, Doctor, when all the while, old silly me has just had a single murder in mind.”

“What are you talking about?” asked the Doctor, suspicious and alarmed.

The sound of drums unexpectedly filled the cold morning air. Turning his head around, the Doctor saw the crowd that had gathered in front of the scaffold diligently step back to the nearest wall in order to clear the way for a party of people that were slowly marching along the path that had just been opened ahead of them. Four figures soon appeared into view. The first was that of Robert Cecil, striding along as he paved the way for the other three. Following right behind him, two royal guards were grabbing someone by the arms and pushing them along as they escorted them to the scaffold. That someone was wearing a filthy white robe, and a dirty white sack had been placed over their head. As they grimly paraded towards the scaffold, some strands of unkempt fair hair which had turned out to be too long for that bloody sack to hide became visible underneath it.

It must be a woman, the Doctor thought. Soon, however, realisation hit him. Without the shadow of a doubt, that had to be the girl Clara had been locked up with. The girl she had been trying so desperately to find and save.

“On the day that impertinent girl was brought to me,” the Queen started to explain when she saw the Doctor’s eyes fixed on the captive, “prisoners started to disappear from the Tower. There is an abundance of recorded evidence of that very thing happening several times, and most of it dates back to the last century. In view of that, we gave the matter no more thought. After all, we already knew that the fairy you and your friends have just helped escape would only perpetrate an abduction when someone was being submitted to torture. For that single reason, we made sure that this particular prisoner remained unharmed in her dungeon, and that food and water were regularly provided. She refused to eat though, but in spite of her hunger strike she has stayed strong and lived until today, which is precisely what I wanted her to do all the while!”

“She has survived long enough to find her death on the whim of a mad woman, but why?” the Doctor asked as he watched the poor captive girl being cruelly dragged up the steps that led to the top of the scaffold.

“Because everybody hates powerful women, Doctor!” said Queen Elizabeth clenching her teeth, her eyes crazed. “Because powerful women must die just because others hate them! It happened to my own mother, it happened to my cousin Mary… And would you believe that I personally have lost count of the number of times someone has tried to poison me? Women are not supposed to be powerful, Doctor – they are supposed to be vulnerable! Thus, when others feel threatened by their
power and their strength, those compelling women simply have to die!"

This time, the Doctor felt a mixture of sympathy and confusion at the Queen’s unexpected declaration of both her haunting fears and her cruel intentions. And all the while, his eyes had been shut. The sight of Robert Cecil dragging the girl to the centre of the scaffold and tying her wrists behind her back turned out to be too much for him to bear.

“But that poor girl is neither your mother nor your cousin, Elizabeth, so why should you feel threatened by her?” he asked, desperate to find out the truth underlying her words. “What has she ever done to you that you should wish her dead?”

“Truth be told, dear husband, nothing!” said the Queen, the Doctor thought, with the innocence and gaiety of a young and naïve modern teenage girl. In a split-second, however, her countenance went back to her previous rage and resentment. “You have, though,” she added, nodding repeatedly as she looked down to the scaffold. “She is just going to pay for what you did.”

“But why?” the Doctor shouted as his soul broke inside him with confusion and hopelessness.

“You should not feel sorry for her ordeal in the slightest, my love!” she added, suddenly grinning from ear to ear. “In all honesty, there is no need! Have I not mentioned that we have brought a swordsman from France especially for her execution? How silly of me to forget telling you that! It is a family tradition, Doctor! That is the way us kings and queens show our mercy to important prisoners, by granting them a precise blow and a prompt death!”

“Oh, for crying out loud, Elizabeth!” the Doctor shouted as he jumped out of his seat in a rage. “Who is she?! Why do you want to do this to her?”

“Do you still not know, Doctor?” she asked as she locked eyes with him. “Deep down inside, I think you do. You would not be as clever as you think you are if you did not.”

The Doctor kept staring at Queen Elizabeth with a frown, wondering whether the poor girl on the scaffold could actually be connected with him, but his thoughts were interrupted when the girl herself raised her voice to do yet once more something she had unsuccessfully been doing for weeks – demand an explanation.

“Someone tell me what’s goin’ on ‘ere, okay?!”

Gaping, the Doctor turned his head around to look at her again as his body and soul started to shiver. Her voice had, in fact, sounded very much like a certain other voice he had once heard every day.

“It can’t be…,” he sighed, discarding that stupid thought he had just had as his eyes darted back to Queen Elizabeth I.

“If that is what you have chosen to believe, my love…,” Elizabeth replied with a frown.

“But it can’t be!” he exclaimed as tears started to well in his incredulous eyes. “It just can’t be!”

It just couldn’t be, he kept saying to himself.

But what if it was?

But it couldn’t be, for goodness sake! The girl he thought he’d just heard had disappeared from his life a long time ago. The brave young girl he had loved and who had loved him in return… She was gone! He had made sure of that himself! The day she came back transformed into an even
braver woman who had crossed universes just to be reunited with him, he sealed her up in a parallel universe with a semi-human version of himself.

Forever.

Momentarily unable to move, the Doctor stood there just staring at the poor scared girl trying to realise something about her, to find some kind of clue or indication that it might actually be her or suddenly see something that he just had not seen before… His eyes searched and searched in vain, and those few seconds felt almost as anxiously long as his nine centuries of existence until, out of the blue, the confirmation he had been looking for took the form of the Eleventh Doctor, who came sprinting out of the White Tower as he waved a certain item of clothing he was holding in his hand.

For a moment, the Tenth Doctor had the feeling that no other incarnation of him had run that fast before, with maybe just one exception, which would have been his own.

His mind was suddenly invaded by the memory of a turbulent night on which he had run that fast, maybe even a little faster. She had been running really fast too. They had been desperately running to each other after years of separation and nothing would prevent them from meeting – not even a Dalek determined to exterminate him.

All at once, he wished he had been holding her dear multi-coloured scarf in his hand on that previous occasion too. He could have wrapped it around her and tied himself to her and never let her go again.

“Stop!” the Eleventh Doctor shouted as he kept running in the direction of the scaffold. “Everybody stop this now!” Then, turning to his past self, the breathless Doctor continued to shout. “Sandshoes! Stop that execution, for god’s sake!”

The Tenth Doctor’s eyes darted from his future self to the girl on the scaffold the moment Robert Cecil placed himself right behind her and took the sack off her head.

And then, his legs faltered.

“Rose!” he almost whispered. It was just a monosyllable, but his entire being failed him the moment he tried to say it, and so its sound was never audible to ears that were not his own.

That girl on the scaffold was… Rose! Her skin was sickeningly pale and there were terribly dark bags under her eyes, and the Doctor couldn’t remember a single time when he had seen her so extremely thin… What had these people done to her?

And how could she even be there at all?

She couldn’t have heard him say her name, but he wondered whether she would be able to see him, now that her head was free from that infamous sack and her eyes were wildly wandering around for the first time since she had been taken to the scaffold. Would she in fact be looking for him? Would she be holding her breath until she could finally sigh with relief the moment she saw his face among the crowd?

The Doctor took a moment to study her face. Even from afar, he knew her well enough to be able to tell that the hair in the back of her neck was by now probably standing on end, but still, he also knew that, deep down, she was not afraid. Well, who was he kidding? Of course she had to be afraid, but he of all people knew really well that her astonishment and her curiosity would be much greater than her fear, or wasn’t that the way it had always been with her?
“Stop!” he finally managed to shriek loud enough for everyone to hear him. “That woman’s done nothing! Stop this now!”

The Doctor then put his hands on the bar right in front of him for support and quickly jumped out of the royal tribune. Unfortunately for him, since all of his senses had been solely focused on Rose from the moment he had seen her face, as soon as his feet landed on the ground, he realised he had not foreseen how difficult it would be to make his way to her through the excited crowd that had gathered again in front of the scaffold. Still, there was nothing else he could do or nowhere else he could turn if he really wanted to get to her.

As it happened, he had never wanted to get to anyone else so badly.

“Rose!” he yelled as he kept pushing blood-thirsty locals in order to make his way through. “Rose! I’m coming!”

“Please, hurry up!” she suddenly screamed. For a split-second, the Doctor’s hearts jumped with joy just because she had heard him and talked to him, but his joy turned into dismay the moment he saw her being forced to kneel down facing the crowd.

“I’m coming, Rose!” the Doctor yelled again, pushing more and more people and making his way to her as he witnessed a series of events that made his blood run cold.

Robert Cecil, the same man who instants before had hit Rose’s legs from behind to make her knees give in forcing her to kneel down, had just proceeded to wrap a blindfold around her head. As Rose would not stay put, he stepped in front of her, and taking her head in his hands, he pushed it down, positioning her neck in the right angle for the swordsman to be able to strike it with just one blow. The executioner eventually unsheathed his sword, and Rose must have heard the noise that had made and guessed what was soon going to happen to her, because she cried out for help once more. She tried to get up, but Cecil stopped her. Then, he made a sign and one of the guards promptly came with a rope in his hand. He crouched down behind her and used the rope to tie up her ankles. Now Rose would not be able to escape at all.

And then, as the swordsman stepped closer to her and got ready to strike the fatal blow, the Eleventh Doctor reached the scaffold and jumped on Robert Cecil’s back, forcing him to let go of Rose. No sooner had she been freed from Cecil’s grasp than the Tenth Doctor jumped on top of the scaffold right in front of her. In the blink of an eye, he crouched down and took her in his arms. Her feet hardly touched the floor as he ran with the intention of carrying her far away from the scaffold, but the rear edge of the lance one of the guards threw at them hit the Doctor in the back, making him lose his balance, and causing Rose and him to fall hard against the stony ground.

Even if a thousand lances had stabbed his back, the Doctor still would not have let go of Rose. He quickly sat up on the ground, lifting her up as he did. As he briefly looked behind him, he saw the Eleventh Doctor also jump out of the scaffold and quickly take his sonic out of his jacket pocket, and placing himself in front of Rose and him, the older Time Lord turned around and pointed his screwdriver at the guards that had quickly surrounded them. He knew it would not keep them at bay for long, but he certainly hoped it would buy them some time.

In the meanwhile, the Tenth Doctor’s hands had flown to Rose’s wrists, which he easily freed from the rope that had been binding them together, and once he had done so, he also removed the rope that had been tied around her ankles. There was a nervous smile on his lips as he removed the blindfold from Rose’s eyes, but contrary to what he had been expecting, when that infamous piece of cloth finally fell upon the floor, they wouldn’t open. Scared stiff, the Doctor stared at her in silence for a moment, but soon he calmed down when he realised he could feel her heart beating.
“I’ve got you!” he said, his arm curled around her back as the fingertips of his free hand softly caressed her cheek. His voiced was trembling when he spoke again. “Oh, how I’ve missed you! Look, Rose! It’s me!”

Rose’s eyelids finally rolled up, and when the Doctor’s eyes finally had the chance to really look into hers, he felt so ecstatic that he thought he could just die on the spot.

“Sandshoes, the royal guards are coming,” said the Eleventh Doctor, who had just run to them and crouched down behind Rose.

And even if he was right there next to him, the Tenth Doctor had simply not heard him. His mind and all of his senses were still too worried about her.

“Rose!” he called again, tears now falling down his face.

But Rose remained silent. Her eyes had froze the moment they had seen the swordsman, who kept staring at her from the top of the scaffold wielding his sword in his hand.

“That bloke’s tried to kill me!” she said in horror.

“Yes he has,” said the Doctor, “and he won’t be coming anywhere near you again of he knows what’s best for him.”

Rose’s astonished eyes then shifted from the menacing swordsman on the scaffold to the man who was holding her in his arms, and when she eventually saw his face, she did the very thing she had promised herself she would do if she ever laid eyes on him again.

She smacked him with all her might.

The Doctor felt his cheek burning as soon as her hand fell upon her shoulder, but that stinging sensation didn’t bother him in the slightest. Come to think of it, he had probably deserved that smack for a really long time… Oh no, that didn’t worry him at all! What had made his stomach knot up tight was the look of abhorrence he had seen in her eyes.

“You get away from me!” she screamed in horror. And then, pulling herself together, Rose pushed him away, freeing herself from his arms, only to seek refuge into those of the Eleventh Doctor’s.

As soon as she did, she looked back at him pointedly, then instantly passed out.

The Eleventh Doctor kept holding her tight in his arms as his look darted from her face to the Tenth Doctor’s, and he wondered what it really was that his eyes had just seen. The younger Time Lord was still staring at her with confusion and disbelief, his brow furrowed as a tear ran down along his cheek. Could this all be a terrible nightmare? Just the delirious last dream of this dying incarnation of a Time Lord?

The two Doctors were so lost in their own thoughts that none of them noticed when Jack, Edward and Clara appeared right behind them.

“Doctor!” Clara cried out, kneeling down by the Eleventh Doctor. Her eyes widened when she saw the face of the girl he was pressing against his chest. “Doctor, you’ve found her!”

“Rose!” Jack whispered incredulously as he strode past Clara.

“You know her?” she asked them.

“She’s an old friend,” answered the Doctor.
“Are you sure?” she asked him in confusion.

The moment he spotted the young blonde lady that the green-eyed Doctor was holding in his arms, Edward crouched down in front of her, took her hand, and wrapped his own around her wrist.

“The lady is still alive, sir,” he announced a few seconds later.

“She’d better be or I’ll know the reason why,” said the Eleventh Doctor as he locked eyes with his past self.

“I shall be the reason why when she is not, my lord,” the Queen’s unexpected voice suddenly declared. She appeared from among the numerous guards that were now surrounding them, and she came to a halt as soon as she found herself standing in front of the two Time Lords. “Swordsman, come down here now!” she shouted. “You still have a job to do!”

“No!” screamed the Tenth Doctor as he jumped on his feet, stood up, and turned around to face her. He put his hand into his pocket with the intention of taking his sonic to keep the guards at bay, but felt quite ridiculous the moment he realised Jack had produced a massive gun out of his comparatively small sword cloak, and that he was pointing it directly at the Queen.

“Nice weapon, Lord Boeshane,” said Queen Elizabeth. “A shame you shall not be using it on me or my men would retaliate,” she added as a dozen more of her guards quickly surrounded the time travellers. Turning to the swordsman, she raised her voice again. “Swordsman! I want you down here, monsieur, and I want you down here right now!”

The word ‘monsieur’ lingered in the Tenth Doctor’s head for a moment, until he remembered that, while they had been sitting down in the royal tribune, Queen Elizabeth had mentioned a swordsman from France would be the executioner in this particular beheading. Her words had not caught his attention then, but right now, as said swordsman jumped out of the scaffold, they just wouldn’t stop echoing in the Doctor’s brain, and he desperately wondered, why? Why would the notion of having a swordsman brought from France all at once sound so terribly familiar?

As the swordsman strode in the direction of his future self and Rose, the Doctor’s brain sped up, frantically searching for a way to prevent that sword from getting a single inch closer to Rose’s body. He knew he was running out of time and his body tensed from head to toes. As his clenched fists fell on the sides of his legs, he noticed something inside one of his trouser pockets. He unconsciously shoved a hand inside that pocket and his fingers squeezed a paper ball that he could not remember putting in it. When he took it out, he found it was Queen Elizabeth’s letter. Not the first she had sent, as Clara and Chinny had told him they had been handed a couple of letters from her on the same day. The letter he was holding in his hand was the one that had set this particular ball rolling. He was about to put it back inside his pocket when he suddenly noticed the date that was written on one of its crumpled edges – 17th May 1600.

17th May. That was the day that Chinny, Clara and him had agreed to arrive in Elizabethan England. They had been early anyway, as they got there a few minutes before midnight, but by the time he made it back to them bringing Captain Jack Harkness with him, that had been the date. And they had been there for over two days now, which meant that the day of Rose’s execution, the Big Day, had been scheduled for 19th May.

“May 19th!” the Doctor suddenly exclaimed as his eyes widened in realisation. And all of a sudden, something clicked inside his brain, and the pieces of this whole puzzle started to fall into place. The beheading, the family tradition of having a French swordsman brought to an execution, and the reason why 19th May should be such an important date for Queen Elizabeth I… He suddenly understood it all!
But what seemed to matter the most was the fact that he had suddenly had an idea.

“I’ve said no,” he repeated, self-confidently. He might be about to break the very laws of time he had abided to for so many years, but right now, he didn’t give a damn about them if breaking them meant there was still a way to save Rose’s life.

“And I have ignored you, dear husband,” Queen Elizabeth said to him. “Guards!”

With an almost imperceptible nod, Queen Elizabeth’s guards got closer, and soon, Jack, Clara, Edward and the Tenth Doctor himself felt the cold touch of a sword blade against their throats. Meanwhile, the French swordsman had finally come to a halt after reaching the Eleventh Doctor, who just would not let Rose out of his arms even if the sharp edge of the most dangerous sword of them all was being aimed at the space between his eyebrows.

“You!” said the Queen, turning to him. “Let her go now!”

“Never!” the Doctor muttered as defiantly as nothing he had ever muttered before.

“Then the two of you shall die,” she sentenced. “Guards! Swordsman! Finish them all right now!”

“I’m so very sorry, Elizabeth,” said the Tenth Doctor in an unexpected and incomprehensible playful tone, “but having one of your men slitting my throat with a sword will not kill me. I’m already dead! I’m a dead man walking. Well, I guess what I really am is a dying Time Lord time-travelling, but who cares about that now?” Having said that, the Doctor grabbed the confused guard’s forearm with his hand, and by simply lifting it up, he walked free from his menacing sword and sauntered towards Queen Elizabeth. “My point is, I’m dead already. An overdose of radiation did the job for you, Your Majesty, and a time paradox is the only thing that’s still keeping me alive.”

“Then tell me, my love, if you are already dead, why will you just not stop talking?” she asked him sarcastically.

“Because I have to persuade you to let all these people go before I can rest in peace,” he answered.

“We are long past that, my dear husband,” she told him. “As far as I am concerned, all of them are as dead as you are.”

“Don’t underestimate the lengths that a dying Time Lord would go to to protect the ones he loves, Elizabeth,” he warned her.

“Sandshoes!” exclaimed the Eleventh Doctor as he sensed his past self’s anger. “Sandshoes, what the hell are you doing?”

“This stupid pantomime ends now!” the Queen shouted, and pointing down at Rose, she gave the order again. “Guards! Swordsman! Kill that girl at once!”

The guards that had until then been holding Clara, Jack and Edward hostages suddenly released them and moved in the direction of the Eleventh Doctor and Rose, but no sooner had they done so than the Tenth Doctor quickly turned to his friends and, running in their direction, pushed Captain Jack Harkness against a wall.

“I’ll scream with excitement the moment you finally kiss me senseless and tell me that you’re in love with me, Doctor,” Jack said to him, “but please, tell me this is not that moment.”

“Doctor, you stay where you are and do not dare move again!” the Queen shouted.
But the Tenth Doctor didn’t answer. He was too flustered and excited anticipating both what he had chosen to do and the consequences of such choice.

The Eleventh Doctor couldn’t help but observe as his past self rolled up Jack’s sleeve and smiled upon seeing the vortex manipulator wrapped around his friend’s wrist.

“Sandshoes!” the Eleventh Doctor exclaimed again.

“Jack, I need you to do something for me,” the Tenth Doctor murmured.

“I’d suspected that much, yeah,” Jack said, raising his eyebrows as he nodded.

“I might need you to….,” the Doctor’s tone turned a bit sombre as he went on. “You know. Die again.”

“Okay then, the usual stuff! Nothing I can’t handle, is it?” Jack added matter-of-factly.

“Doctor, stop!” the crazed Queen shouted. “Guards! Go get him!”

Much to the Eleventh Doctor’s relief, the guards turned around from Rose and him and motioned towards the other Time Lord. However, they merely had a few seconds to stalk their new prey, as the Tenth Doctor had already introduced the activation code into Jack’s vortex manipulator and put his screwdriver back in his pocket after briefly sonicking it.

“Once and for all, Sandshoes,” Future Him called again, “tell me where you’re going!”

The Tenth Doctor’s forefinger had nearly pressed the last button of Jack’s time-travelling wrist device, but upon hearing the Eleventh Doctor calling on him again, he turned around and fixed his resolute eyes on the worried eyes of his future self.

“To find Lady Greensleeves,” he simply answered.

And then, the Doctor pressed that crucial last button and he and Jack vanished within a flash of white light.

The Queen’s guards froze in place after bearing witnesses to the wondrous power of a vortex manipulator for the first time in their lives. Even the crowd had been rendered speechless by the impressive glow of the white light, which was all they had been able to see now that all the action was taking place on the ground behind the scaffold. Queen Elizabeth I seemed to be the only one that had not been impressed by what had just happened in the slightest.

“My dear husband!” she sighed. “Why do you always have to go when things are just about to get interesting?”

Her eyes then turned to the Eleventh Doctor, who was still holding the woman she wanted dead so badly close against his chest. For a moment, the Doctor felt scared. Jack and Sandshoes were now gone, there were dozens of guards surrounding them, and Rose was still unconscious. Maybe if he managed to get hold of Clara’s vortex manipulator he might stand a chance to take them all out of there safely, but he could hardly move with Rose’s body in his arms, and the swordsman was still too close. He knew only too well what that man would do to her if he ventured leaving her unattended for one single second, so what was he supposed to do? And still, he refused to believe that there was nothing he could do at all!

Fortunately for him, soon there was another flash of white light and there they were again, the Tenth Doctor and Captain Jack Harkness. Jack was desperately clinging to the Doctor with his back
turned to the rest of them. The Doctor himself had one protective arm wrapped around him, and his chin was resting on his head. He was trembling so violently that his sword cloak would not stop shaking. Why, they all thought? What could have happened to him that he suddenly was so terribly scared? His right arm was hooked to the Time Lord’s neck, and his left hand was holding the vortex manipulator with white-knuckle grip. It was the Doctor who was now wearing it instead of him.

It didn’t make any sense, Clara thought. Suddenly, she and all the others noticed how Captain Jack Harkness now seemed to be a few inches shorter than he had been before, and things started to make even less sense to her, if such a thing was even possible.

The Tenth Doctor gradually opened his terrified eyes, and the moment he saw his friends’ faces as well as Queen Elizabeth’s, they brightened up with hope. Slowly, the Doctor softened his grip on Jack, and looking down at him, he smiled as he put his hands on his friend’s still shaking shoulders.

“It’s okay,” he whispered, “you’re safe now”. Then, he let go of Jack’s shoulders and briefly stared behind him, his eyes dancing, just to let him know that, at long last, it was finally safe for him to turn around.

Then, Captain Jack Harkness slowly raised a hand to his head and took his hat off. Under the gaze of the Queen’s guards, the time travellers, the Queen herself and Sir Robert Cecil, long strands of black hair immediately fell on his shoulders. Holding the hat in his hand, he then turned around, and what the others saw was the teary-eyed and terrified face of a beautiful young woman who was undeniably wearing Captain Jack’s Renaissance outfit.

Not knowing what was actually happening, Clara and Edward looked at each other, and then at the Eleventh Doctor. Much to their astonishment, the green-eyed Time Lord’s face beamed with joy, probably because he knew who that young woman was. Clara watched as his eyes darted from her to Queen Elizabeth herself, and the wonderment she saw in them made her turn her own eyes to the sovereign.

Good Queen Bess had not said a single word since she had seen the newcomer’s face. She stood staring at her in silence, first narrowing her eyes, then gaping, and eventually with her unbelieving eyes wide open as she put her delicate hands over her mouth. She stayed put for a long time, doing nothing but intently look at that young woman, and all the while, neither she nor any of the people surrounding her dared say a single word.

“Robert,” she finally said to Lord Cecil, her tone serious and commanding. “Take everyone away from here and leave me alone with the Doctor and his friends.”

“But Your Majesty,” Cecil replied, “who is that woman? Are you certain that this is the right thing to…?”

“I do not wish to know whatever it is you are going to say, Lord Cecil,” Queen Elizabeth back talked. “I just wish that you and every person who is not associated with the Doctor would leave us alone now.”

Lord Cecil had been Queen Elizabeth’s confidant for over a decade, as his father had been before him, and not once in all those years had he felt as undermined by Her Majesty’s words as he was feeling right now, especially since they had been spoken in the presence of the man she had for a long time claimed to be her sworn enemy, the same man she had been plotting against for months with the help of Robert Cecil himself. He feared he might get poisoned if he swallowed all the words he would just not say to his beloved monarch, but upon considering what the consequences
might be, he soon understood that it would definitely be wiser to obey. Thus, following Cecil’s lead, all the guards and the swordsman walked away from them. Cecil walked up the steps leading to the top of the scaffold, and once he had reached it, he addressed the people who had gathered outside the White Tower to witness the Big Day’s execution.

“Good people of London!” Cecil shouted. “By order of Her Gracious Majesty Queen Elizabeth I, we must leave this place at once! Celebrations for the Big Day shall go on outside the Tower!”

Had the Queen not been present, the good people of London would most certainly have stayed to demand blood. After all, they had come to the Tower expecting to see an execution just to be disappointed and see none. However, no one would dare raise their voice if the Queen herself had ordered that they left, so without further ado, leave they did in the most absolute silence.

Once Cecil and the guards were gone, Elizabeth promptly took a look around to make sure that they were far enough not to come back. When she did, she nervously raised her hands almost to the level of her chin, and with the index and the thumb of her right hand, she carefully opened the cover of her beautiful locket ring, one with her initial encrusted in diamonds that she had been wearing for decades. Once open, her eyes studied the ring’s interior. Nobody else in her kingdom had ever seen or even knew what was inside it, just her. She loved that idea, of course! It had always made her feel that she was not really a queen, but a woman with a secret. Inside her locket ring, there were two miniature portraits, one of Elizabeth herself, and the other of her mother, the notorious Queen Anne Boleyn. Elizabeth stared at her mother’s portrait in silence for a moment, then turned her eyes to the woman the Doctor had brought with him. Gaping incredulously, she looked back to the portrait, then back at the woman, and for a while, she kept taking turns to look first at one and then at the other, until her eyes found no difference between them and her heart felt about to explode inside her chest.

Queen Elizabeth started to step slowly in the direction of the woman.

“You still remember her, don’t you?” softly said the Tenth Doctor. “The truth is you could never forget her and you could never stop loving her.”

After hearing the Doctor’s words, the young woman looked intently at the old lady before her, her black eyes still reddened by her tears and confusion written all over her face.

“I’m giving you your mother, Elizabeth,” said the Doctor. “Just let Rose go. Let all my friends go. If you do, she stays.”

“Mommy!” Queen Elizabeth finally cried out, tears falling down her own cheeks as she reached out for her. She buried her body in hers and wrapped her arms around her neck, crying bitterly over her shoulder.

The Tenth Doctor’s eyes glanced at the two queens for a moment. Knowing that Rose was now safe, he finally sighed with relief. Immediately afterwards, he pressed another button of his vortex manipulator and disappeared in another flash of white light, only to reappear a few seconds later with a hand wrapped around Captain Jack Harness’s wrist.

With each passing moment, there were more and more questions floating in the air.

Anne Boleyn, former Queen of England, sighed with relief at the sight of the two men that had come out of the blue and saved her life on the very morning of her execution. For that, she was truly grateful, but why they should have brought her before that old lady who was now crying in her arms and kept calling her ‘mommy’, she certainly did not understand.
Edward de Vere kept looking at the brown-eyed Doctor in amazement, stunned by the knowledge of the identity of the woman he had brought with him from the past. He had guessed that the reason why Queen Anne Boleyn was wearing Lord Jack Boeshane’s outfit had to be the same reason why Lord Jack was wearing a lady’s grey dress that had turned out to be too short considering his long strong legs, but how swapping outfits with a stranger from the future had exactly helped her escape her probably imminent execution was something he still could not quite understand.

As far as Clara was concerned, she was wondering why the Doctor could have referred to the unconscious girl he was holding in his arms as ‘an old friend’ when that girl had told her she had never met the man that Clara had called ‘the Doctor’.

And yet, the one who was most puzzled of them all was the Doctor himself, who just would never understand why, once upon a time, when he had been younger and thinner and his eyes had been darker, and he had worn sandshoes and a pinstriped suit, right after saving Rose Tyler from the sword of her executioner and from the wrath of the woman who had long wanted her dead, he would simply just turn around and desperately run away from her.
The exact same words had been going through the Eleventh Doctor’s head from the moment when, after bringing Captain Jack Harkness back from the 1530s, his past self had run away from the site of the scaffold and from the Tower of London, leaving not only him and Clara and Jack and Edward, but also Rose Tyler behind. Now that they had all been accommodated in Whitehall Palace and that he was sitting on an armchair by the bed in which Rose Tyler had been fast sleeping for hours, those words would resonate even more loudly, and the undisputable truth that they stated would seem even more incomprehensible.

Sandshoes was not doing this, he kept thinking. Sandshoes just couldn’t be doing this!

And yet, he was! He undeniably was, and that single fact that he was had just posed a whole new set of questions, the first of them all being, why? Why would the other Doctor flee from the Tower of London after being reunited with the woman he had once loved and lost? And as far as that woman was concerned, why would she smack him? The Rose Tyler he had known would only have come back from that other universe out of her deeply-felt love for him. She would never have made such a mentally exhausting and emotionally draining effort just because she was upset he had thrown her into the arms of a different version of himself and abandoned her forever. If the woman who was lying in the bed right opposite was still that Rose Tyler whose memory he had always cherished, it simply made no sense at all.

For the time being, he could only think of one reason which might explain why Rose had rejected him, but even if it seemed a plausible one, he also thought it to be highly unlikely. It went without saying that she obviously couldn’t have enjoyed her imprisonment in the Tower, but could that experience really have changed her so much? Could it have radically transformed his brave friend and turned her upside down, up to the point where she would honestly blame him and hate him for it?

Oh, for goodness’ sake! There was still something that he just was not being able to see, something that he needed to see so badly! Because, if this was driving him mad, what wouldn’t it be doing to the other Doctor?

Oh, his mind said. Oh no, his mind went on. And just like that, in the middle of so much chaos, out of the blue one thing had just become clear.

Where the Tenth Doctor had gone to was no mystery to him anymore.

“We teleported to her dungeon,” said Captain Jack Harkness from his place on one edge of the windowsill behind the Doctor’s armchair. Turning his head towards sleeping Rose, he raised his eyebrows at her shape. “Only that we got there sixty-four years in advance, when it happened to be Anne Boleyn’s dungeon, and since she was still Queen of England back then, it looked much nicer. All her maids were keeping her company, so it was more crowded too. No Zygons in the court of Henry VIII by the way, I can assure you.”
The morning was being unusually chilly and foggy for the month of May, but since luckily the unpleasantly cold room that had been procured for Rose happened to have a fireplace, Clara strode to it and crouched down as soon as she saw it, determined to light the fire. When after a while she succeeded, instead of joining the others somewhere nearer the bed, she remained there in front of the fireplace, occasionally adding more logs to the fire as she stoked it, her mind and body caught under the warm spell of the untameable flames.

“So the Queen put Rose in the same dungeon where they’d locked up her mother?” she asked, turning away from the fireplace to look at Captain Jack Harkness with an incredulous frown.

“So it would seem,” Jack replied while Edward de Vere kept listening attentively from the other edge of the windowsill. The Earl of Oxford had been numbed from the moment the word ‘mommy’ escaped through Queen Elizabeth’s lips. He had been left awe-struck by their encounter with the alien siren Melusina and the princes in the Tower, but at present he was struggling with the acceptance of the fact that the young lady who had come from the past in the company of the brown-eyed Doctor was actually Queen Elizabeth’s mother, the notorious Anne Boleyn, whom history had assumed to have been beheaded by order of her husband King Henry VIII over six decades before. That knowledge was making his own head spin, and it probably still would for days and days. “It was the morning of the day of her execution, 19th May 1536, exactly sixty-four years before the Big Day.”

The Doctor didn’t say a word, mostly because he would never admit to such thing in public, but the fact remained that, deep down inside, he felt terribly, terribly stupid. As far as Queen Elizabeth had known all her life, her mother had been beheaded on 19th May 1536, and everything she had done – locking Rose up in the same dungeon, setting the same date for Rose’s execution, even having a swordsman brought from France –, she had done it to make Rose’s execution look as much as possible as Anne Boleyn’s. He was angry at himself because it just had never crossed his mind that the day on which Elizabeth’s letter had been dated would turn out to be so relevant to her plans. His younger self, however, had turned out to be a little wiser, and even if he must have understood that there might have been a chance for Elizabeth I to have grown up despising and hating that woman whom others would usually refer to as ‘the whore’ or ‘the traitor’, what would prevail in the end, what would save them all, would be the love that a three-year-old child had always felt for the mother she had so tragically lost.

“She was waiting for the guards to go get her and take her to the scaffold when we arrived,” Jack added.

“And how did you get her out?” asked Clara.

“That wasn’t the first of our problems, Miss Oswald,” Jack answered. “The first thing we had to do was explain who we were and what we actually intended to do and make it all sound like we were not taking the mickey out of them.”

“Does that all mean you needed to earn their trust, sir?” asked Edward, finally waking up from his reverie.

“Luckily for us,” Jack answered, “the fact that the Doc and I materialised out of nothing helped. Her maids were quite scared at first, but as regards Anne Boleyn, he seemed to trust us from the get-go!”

“She must’ve been terrified and desperate,” said Clara, “that must’ve helped too.”

“Whatever her reasons, she did trust us,” Jack went on. “And so, when the guards came for her, the Doctor and I welcomed them into the chamber and suggested a toast to Henry VIII.”
“You did what?” Clara asked, gaping.

“While the Doctor was busy not letting them talk,” he added, “I took a bottle of wine and some glasses from a table in the corner, then we pretty much forced them all to take a sip. What they didn’t know was that I’d managed to put a few drops of this thing my team and I had been developing at Torchwood in the wine. Basically, it’s a l…”

“What’s that?” Clara interrupted with a frown.

“I’m sorry?” Jack asked her.

“You said ‘Torchwood’. What is it?” she asked again.

“Don’t you know?” an incredulous Jack asked her back.

“Why should I?” she said.

“You’ve brought your amnesia pills, haven’t you?” the Doctor then asked Jack.

“Yes I have,” Jack replied, “but that’s not what we gave them. What I put into their wine was a hallucinogenic drink which has two amazing effects on people. First, it knocks them out, and then it makes them see a distorted version of reality when they wake up, which means that, although they felt a bit dizzy, they could still see us all before them. What they never noticed was that Anne Boleyn and I had swapped clothes, so after the Doctor teleported back to the year 1600 and brought her with him, the head that the French swordsman actually cut off on the scaffold was mine.”

“I beg your pardon, sir?” Edward asked incredulously.

“It’s okay, Eddie. Pardoned you are, and pardoned you’ll remain as long as you beg for something other than mercy later. The French swordsman did, mon petite Pierre! So skillful with his sword!” Jack added with a smirk.

“You can’t have been beheaded instead of Anne Boleyn, Captain,” said Clara with a frown. “I mean, look at you!”

“I know,” Jack said, his eyes darting to her as he smirked again, “I always look great when I come back, so who’d be able to tell?”

“That’s not what I meant, Captain,” she said. Standing up from her seat in front of the fire, she sauntered towards him as she continued to talk. “I’d heard about you, you know. Kate Stewart accidentally mentioned your ability to come back from the dead, so I guess you must be some sort of immortal human-like alien. You’re not a Time Lord though, or you’d have regenerated, but the thing is, how could you possibly come back after having your head chopped off from the rest of your body? I doubt even a Time Lord could come back after such atrocity…”

The Doctor smiled silently at his friend’s clever remark.

“I’m afraid I don’t know how I did it,” Jack answered. “I only know that I did it. I never really worry about the details… I just might have grown another head! Anyway, I really appreciate your concern, Miss Oswald, but just so you know, I’ve been through much much worse than decapitation, and as you may have guessed by now, I keep coming back.”

“And what about the people that attended the execution?” Clara cut in. “You didn’t put anything in their drinks, did you? Didn’t they notice you weren’t Anne Boleyn?”

“They must’ve thought Henry VIII had some really diverse tastes,” said the Eleventh Doctor from
his place on the armchair.

Upon hearing his dear voice for the second time after his long and thoughtful silence, Clara turned away from Edward and Captain Jack Harkness and stepped in the direction of the Doctor. Once she found herself by his armchair, she crouched down by his side. Her eyes then fell upon the girl right opposite, who was still in deep sleep and thus completely unaware of their conversation.

“She needs to regain her strength,” she told him, having seen the worried expression on his face. “She’s a bit dehydrated and a bit undernourished, and I’d say she’s terribly exhausted too. Don’t think she’s been sleeping much while she’s been in the Tower. Other than that, she’ll be okay soon, Doctor. I promise.”

“I know she will,” he simply answered as he covered the small hand that Clara had rested on the chair’s arm with his bigger and infinitely more restless one.

“I’d say our job here’s almost done then,” she added, smiling softly.

“I wish it were,” the Doctor mumbled, “but I’m afraid it’s only just begun.”

“What do you mean?” Clara asked him.

“I mean that nothing seems to make any sense, and that we need to find Sandshoes as soon as possible,” he told her.

“I would’ve thought he’d be back by now,” she said, furrowing her brow.

“Well, I guess I knew for a fact that he wouldn’t,” the Doctor told her.

Much to the Doctor’s surprise, Clara did not reply to that remark. She had suddenly become busy picking something up from underneath the armchair. His eyes were still at times fixed on Rose Tyler, at times wandering about the room in continuous search for the perfectly obvious explanation that at present was still refusing to present itself, so he never realised what it was that Clara had taken from the carpeted floor until she got up and walked towards the bedside table.

“I guess she’ll want it back before we take her home,” she said. “You think the rest of her clothes will still be somewhere in that dungeon?”

When the Doctor turned his head to the bedside table, his eyes caught a glimpse of Rose’s long colourful woollen scarf just an instant before Clara closed the drawer she had put it in. Surely, the rest of her clothes had to be under the mattress where he had found the scarf, he thought, but soon he lost his train of thought when a certain thought unexpectedly came to his head and stayed there, as it seemed to offer new possibilities to successfully solve the puzzle that the events of the past few days had created.

It only took the Doctor an instant to jump out of the armchair. Turning to the bedside table, he stepped towards Clara, put his hands on both sides of her head and, leaning his head down, he planted a soft kiss on her lips. After he pulled away, both of them looked slightly blushed but none would say a single word, so they just kept staring at each other in silence for a while.

“I gotta go now,” he finally whispered. “I need to find him.”

“Go. I’ll look after her,” said Clara. Back on her feet again, she took a hand to her wrist and unfastened the strap of the vortex manipulator she was still wearing. After that, she offered it to the Doctor, who smiled softly as he took it from her and wrapped it around his own wrist.
Finally ready and willing to go, the Doctor turned around and came closer to Captain Jack Harkness and Edward de Vere before he did, with Clara following right behind him.

“Jack, Verie,” he told them, “you stay here with Clara and look after Rose. I’ll be back in no time at all.”

“No need to ask, Doc,” Jack told him. “And please, don’t let the other Doc come up with any of his overdramatic excuses and bring him with you. He may be the wisest and best travelled being in this universe, but right now, he’s acting like a child.”

Jack had hit the nail right on the head, the Doctor thought, but he didn’t say a word. He just took another look at Clara and gave her a brief smile before he lifted up his sleeve and swiftly pressed all the necessary buttons on the vortex manipulator.

“Back in a mo’,” he simply said.

And then, in the blink of an eye, he teleported away from the room.

Once the Doctor had disappeared, Jack slowly stood up from the windowsill and sauntered towards the armchair. Standing behind it, he put his hands on its back and kept silently staring at Rose for a few seconds.

“He better bring him back or I’ll go fetch him myself,” he finally said, frowning.

“He’ll bring him back, Captain, I’m sure,” said Clara. “And when he does, the two of them will have to explain why Queen Elizabeth was convinced she’d outdone herself when she locked an innocent girl up in the Tower.”

“What?” Jack asked, turning to her in astonishment. “Your lover boy in purple hasn’t told you about her yet?”

Clara shook her head slightly, and when she did, Jack gaped.

“Okay! Fair enough!” he exclaimed. “What was I thinking anyway? Of course he hasn’t told you yet… He’s the Doctor! But you know what? Eddie here knows. I’ve told him! Good thing the first wife is sleeping and didn’t see a thing when he snogged you or he’d never hear the end of it, but why does he never…?”

“Hang on, Captain! What did you just say?” Clara asked, narrowing her eyes. “And just so you know, he didn’t snog me! He just… He didn’t snog me!”

“If you say so,” said Jack with yet another smirk.

The short silence that followed was broken a few seconds later, when Edward decided to ask Lord Jack a question he had been wanting to ask from the moment Lady Clara brought that subject up.

“Are you really immortal, my lord?”

Jack turned towards him, smiling sweetly.

“To be completely honest, Eddie, I don’t really know,” Jack answered, turning to him. “What I know is, since this thing happened to me over a hundred years ago, no one’s been able to kill me, and take it from me, baby, some have tried really hard!”

“So you weren’t born like this,” Clara muttered, furrowing her brow.
“No I wasn’t,” Jack told her. “I used to be an ordinary human being, Miss Oswald, same as you.”

“Then what happened?” Clara asked him.

Jack didn’t say anything at first. What he did was turn around once more to stare at Rose Tyler again. Slowly, he took his hands off the back of the armchair, stepped to its front, and sat down.

And then, when nobody was there to see the small smile that had curled up his lips, he finally answered.

“The Doctor and Rose, Clara. They happened.”

A brief silence followed, and while it lasted, Clara understood there was nothing else she could do except the very thing she had not wanted to do for as long as the Doctor had been the one sitting on that armchair. Now that the unasked question was starting to burn her throat and the Doctor was not there to prevent her from asking it, she walked towards Captain Jack Harkness, crouched down right by his side, and putting her hand on his, she asked him that question which, for some unknown reason, she very much suspected the Doctor would never answer.

“Who is she, Captain?”

*****

From the moment he had turned away from Rose and all the others and left them in the site of the scaffold, a voice in the Tenth Doctor’s head had been repeating the same sentence up to the point when it had become some sort of mantra. He would occasionally shut his eyes down and keep repeating it while he ran outside the Tower, then out of the city, and finally along the countryside and into the wood.

Run, Doctor. Run. Run as fast as you can and don’t look back.

It had been a cold and misty morning, but when the fog finally seemed to be starting to dissipate, it didn’t take him long to find the exact spot where he and Chinny had hidden the very thing he had come looking for – home.

Run, Doctor. Just run.

The Doctor had been very pleased upon finding his beloved spaceship countless times before, but none of them as much as this one, even if he had decided to do what he had decided to do.

Don’t look back anymore, Doctor!

He sprinted for the TARDIS and slapped his fingers as he approached it. The door opened softly and he rushed in, but instead of coming to a halt when he entered, he kept running. He ran along the runaway and past the console, stopping only when he found himself standing right in front of the other TARDIS – his TARDIS. He blinked and took a deep sigh, then shoved his hand inside his trouser pocket and produced the key. Slowly, he introduced it into the lock, turned it around, and putting his extended palm in the blue wood, he pushed. Once the TARDIS door had opened completely, he seemed to need a moment to take a deep breath and make himself ready for whatever it might be that was awaiting him inside. Eventually, he languidly went in and pushed the door closed by leaning against it.

Shutting his eyes down once more, he took a heavy breath as he fought the tears that had just started to sparkle in his eyes. Teary as they would remain, the Doctor opened them again and let them scurry around. It was dark and scorching hot in the console room, and it still smelled of
smoke. As he gazed down, the Doctor noticed there were still small flames scattered all over underneath the floor plate. Beyond the shadow of a doubt, they were waiting for the moment when his regeneration would start over again to grow high and swallow everything around them, and for a moment, the thought crossed his mind that he had not really entered his spaceship, but his own private hell, which ironically was what he had wanted to do from the instant he ran away from the Tower.

Run, Doctor, run.

“Sorry to disappoint you, Sandshoes,” said a voice from behind the console, “but that won’t work. Your regeneration won’t be set into motion again until I decide to pull up anchors and your TARDIS is freed from mine.”

Those words literally felt not so much like another smack on his cheek, but rather like a blow to the gut.

“I’ve used the sonic to trace the signal from the time rotor,” he explained, though no explanations had been requested by the version of him that was still hidden behind the blacked-out console. “To save time, I’ve made a beeline, and I’ve pretty much slogged my guts out to be here as soon as I could, so please tell me, Chinny, how on earth could you get here before I did?”

“I took a shortcut”, said the Eleventh Doctor, stepping aside so as to make himself visible to his past self. Then, lifting one arm up, he rolled up his sleeve and showed the other Time Lord the vortex manipulator that Clara had given to him.

“I’d have wanted to do that too,” said the Tenth Doctor, “but Jack literally ripped his vortex manipulator off my wrist when I returned to 1536 to bring him back to 1600. Now go away and leave me alone!”

“So… Anne Boleyn nonetheless!” said the Eleventh Doctor, deliberately ignoring his past self’s latest remark. “When I said you should’ve broken some rule sometime I meant something like… I don’t know! Maybe taking Vincent Van Gogh to an exhibition of his own paintings in the twenty-first century, but not preventing the execution of the first Queen of England ever to be executed. You’ve excelled yourself, Sandshoes! Well done!”

“I said, out of my way, Chinny! Didn’t you hear me?” he snarled.

The Eleventh Doctor crossed his arms over his chest. He had known that pinstriped him wouldn’t be very pleased to see him this time, but he also knew what pinstriped him would inevitably try to do if he wasn’t there to stop him.

“I’m not leaving yet, Sandshoes,” he finally told him. “I’ve come here for you.”

“Then you shouldn’t have bothered!” said the Tenth Doctor furiously as he strode in his direction. “Nice meeting you and Clara, Mr Bow Tie, but now, if you’ll excuse me, I really gotta go!”

“Oh my gosh!” exclaimed the Eleventh Doctor in a sarcastic tone. “Have I really heard what I think I’ve heard? At at long last, Number Ten wants to go! Never thought I’d live till the day I’d hear that!”

“She hates me, Chinny!” the Tenth Doctor snapped, then stopped to gasp for air. “Are you happy now? You were right back there in the tunnels… She hates me! She hates me ‘cause I abandoned her and I will never forgive myself for that!”

“She doesn’t hate you, Sandshoes,” the Eleventh Doctor told him after a brief silence. “She’s just
scared of you.”

“And she’s got good reasons to be, doesn’t she?” murmured the Tenth Doctor, his suddenly terrified eyes teary as they stared into space. “They nearly kill her this time, Chinny, and it’s all my fault, so who knows what I’ll be doing to her the next time!”

“I don’t think there’ll be a next time, Sandshoes,” said the older Time Lord. “This time, however, you might just do your best.”

“What does it even mean?” sobbed the Tenth Doctor.

The tormented Time Lord had been trying to hold back the tears of hopelessness that had been building up in his eyes, but the pain in his very soul suddenly became unspeakably unbearable, and eventually, tears flowed, silent, bitter, and regretful. He put both his hands on the console, and leaning forward, he remained face down for a while, attempting to regain his composure – and failing.

The Eleventh Doctor’s eyes had also wetted, but he hadn’t even noticed. He felt truly and deeply sorry for that past version of himself, and unable to fight the uncontrollable urge to soothe him, he put a hand on his shoulder before he finally answered his question.

“It means that is not the reason why she’s scared of you.”

“Then why is she?” the Tenth Doctor muttered.

“There’s something you need to see,” bow-tied him told him.

“Please, Chinny, just let me go,” he begged him. “There’s no way you can fix this. I should’ve fixed it myself while I had the chance and I didn’t. Now it’s just too late.”

“Is it?” asked him the Eleventh Doctor. “Is it really too late? When Rose Tyler is sleeping in a bed in this very universe a mere five miles away from this place, do you seriously believe there’s nothing you can do to fix this? Would you rather just regenerate and forget that this ever happened?”

“Wouldn’t it be better for everyone else if I just did?” the Tenth Doctor asked him, disheartened, as he lifted his head and turned it in the direction of the other Doctor.

“No, Sandshoes, it wouldn’t!” exclaimed the Eleventh Doctor decidedly.

“Oh, I think it would,” said his younger self standing up straight as he took his hands out of the console. “She doesn’t know you’re me, Chinny, so you make something up and take her home or wherever it is that she’s safe, and then y…”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake, Sandshoes, stop talking nonsense!” snapped the older Time Lord, who came even closer to his past self before he furiously went on. “Don’t you understand? This really is your last chance to make things right with Rose Tyler, Doctor, and you are so taking it!”

Immediately after saying those words, the Eleventh Doctor turned around and took a few quick steps towards the jump seat behind him. Leaning down slightly, he took something that had been lying on top of that seat, then turned around again.

After everything that had happened within the last few hours, the Tenth Doctor was still finding it extremely difficult to calm down and think straight, but the moment his eyes travelled from Future Him to the neatly folded pile of clothes that him had just put on the console right before him, all at
once, he grew still. He immediately recognised them, but even if he did, he still needed a moment not only to try to understand their significance, but also to start to believe that things might have been completely different from the way he had imagined them to be.

All at once, his mind became reconciled to the fact that, fortunately, he had been completely wrong.

“I made a stopover at the Tower before I teleported here,” explained the Eleventh Doctor, “and I found these in the same place where I’d found her scarf.”

The Tenth Doctor had by now started to caress each and every single one of the garments in that pile with his long, thin, and now shaky fingers. Then, he took a few minutes to, one at a time, examine them all.

First of all, he took a soft purple woollen hat that had been resting on top of the pile, and he spent an instant musing over a long golden hair that had got stuck inside it. After a while, he gently put the hat back on the console, then laid his hands on a pair of blue jeans. Unfolding them, he saw they were the sort of blue bootcut jeans he had often seen Rose wear during the blissful time they’d spent travelling in space and time together.

His lips curled into a soft smile, but he didn’t even notice.

Soon his eyes were taking in the last of the items of clothing that had been resting on the console. This was probably the sort he had most frequently seen Rose wear back during those days. A hoodie. He suddenly remembered how many she had actually worn and how they had been red, or pink, or grey, or purple… She seemed to have owned one in every possible colour! The one he was holding in his hands right now was her usual pink, although the cuffs, the waistband and the lining were light blue.

Trembling all over, the Doctor took the hoodie in his hands and brought it close to his face so as to feel its softness and smell its scent – that scent he had missed so much for merely a couple of years which had felt like a couple of centuries, and then, all of a sudden, his mind seemed to start to quiet down.

Things were, at long last, starting not to seem so unfortunate.

“She hasn’t met you yet,” unexpectedly said the Eleventh Doctor, waking him up from this new reverie of his. “At least, not properly. That’s why she was so scared of you.”

Of course, thought the Tenth Doctor. The clothes he had been holding in his hands were the clothes Rose Tyler had been wearing the last time he had seen her, right after midnight outside her estate on 1st January 2005, when she had thought him to be nothing more than a drunkard while he had been dying even a little faster at not really being able to say goodbye the way he would have wanted to. Rose would have been the last person that incarnation of him would ever have seen had it not been for the fact that the next Doctor and Clara Oswald had interrupted his regeneration just a few minutes later.

“But how on earth did she end up here?” the Tenth Doctor asked as he pressed Rose’s hoodie tight against his chest.

“Well,” said the Eleventh Doctor, “I’m afraid I’m not quite sure yet. I have a theory though. In fact, I was on my way to ask Queen Elizabeth I what she made of it when I decided to take a detour and come here. So what do you say now, Sandshoes? You wanna come with me?”
It was long past midday when Rose finally woke up. She had noticed the crackling sound of wood in the fireplace and the fresh scent of the pillow her head was resting upon long before she opened her eyes. Inhaling deeply, she indulged for a bit longer in the simple pleasure of stretching her back and legs underneath the warmth of the bedcovers. After all, how long had it been since the last time she had slept like this?

And then, the very moment she asked herself that question, the events of the past few weeks and especially those of that very morning came back to her all of a sudden, feeling like a punch in the pit of her stomach, and her eyes blinked open as she gave out a loud sob.

“It’s okay,” she heard a familiar female voice say. The gentle sound of swift footsteps came next, followed by the sensation of the mattress sinking slightly in under the weight of the body that had just sat right next to hers. “You’re safe now, Rose. And you may not be not home yet, but you’ll be really soon. I promise.”

Turning to the other side of the bed, tears actually started to fall from her eyes when Rose recognised the face of the woman who was sitting next to her.

“Clara!” she exclaimed as she quickly sat up straight and leaned forward to wrap her grateful arms around her one-night cellmate. “Clara, you did it! You came for me!”

“Of course I did,” said Clara, wrapping her arms around her as well and letting Rose’s head rest on her shoulder. “I promised that I would, didn’t I?”

It had been quite a few weeks since the last time Rose had actually been hugged, and even if Clara was still little else than a stranger to her, she happened to be the stranger that had saved her life, so she stayed in that stranger’s arms for a brief while, crying tears of joy because, at long last, she was not alone anymore.

“Where am I?” she asked her.

“Whitehall Palace, London 1600,” replied Clara, and no sooner had she done so than Rose went completely stiff.

“London 1600?!?” she exclaimed releasing her, her eyes and mouth agape.

“Yes,” replied Clara. “There’s no easy way to tell you this, Rose, even if you’ve already got every possible hint you might ever have been given, but the thing is, you’ve come from the future.”

“From the future?” asked Rose in astonishment.

“Yes, and so have I,” Clara added.

“You’re tryin’ to pull my leg, right?” said Rose grimacing. “Ya must be. What’s this? Reality TV
or something?"

“No, it’s not,” said Clara, shaking her head. “This is the Renaissance. And I mean, the real Renaissance, not a TV or film set. And you and I, Rose, we’ve time travelled.”

“Maybe ya have, or you think ya have, but I know that I haven’t,” said Rose, frowning.

“Trust me, you have too,” Clara told her softly. “You just haven’t known until now.”

“But it can’t be!” she exclaimed.

Clara went silent for a moment. The thought crossed her mind that, had she been in Rose’s shoes, her reaction to that particular bit of information would have been exactly the same.

“Listen to me,” she said as she put a hand on Rose’s shoulder. “You saw what happened this morning, right? You were a prisoner in the Tower of London, and the guards, the scaffold, the swordsman… All of those were real. Even Queen Elizabeth was real. Elizabeth I! Didn’t you see her from the top of the scaffold?”

“I did, yeah,” Rose answered as her eyes slowly widened.

“And do you still believe that you really haven’t time travelled?”

“Okay! Okay!” Rose said, showing the first signs of something that looked a little bit like trust. “For the sake of the argument, let’s imagine that I do, right? So, I’ve time travelled!” And then, with a frown, she asked Clara the most crucial question. “But why would that happen to me?”

“Because Queen Elizabeth wanted you dead,” Clara told her, thinking how there were no reasons why she should not tell her the whole truth.

“I got the ‘someone must want me dead’ part on my visit to the scaffold, but… Elizabeth I?” Rose asked, raising her eyebrows. “Elizabeth I wanted me dead? Blimey! I must’ve done some terrible things to ‘er in a different life or something, ‘cause I really can’t remember meeting ‘er in this one…”

“I know it sounds crazy, Rose,” Clara told her, “but take it from me, crazy things happen all the time, more than we can possibly imagine. And most of the time, they turn out to be really wonderful.”

“Having Elizabeth I wanting to chop me head off doesn’t sound like something wonderful to me,” Rose said. “And anyway, why would she?”

“Because…,” Clara started, clearing her throat. “Because there’s this man called the Doctor…”

“Yeah, I know,” Rose interrupted, “you so keep saying.”

“The Doctor is my friend,” Clara added, “and I’ve been told he’s your friend too.”

“But I’ve never even met ‘im,” said Rose, licking her lips.

“You might not have met him yet,” said Clara, “but you will. In the future.”

“Okay, here we go again!” said Rose, rolling her eyes. “So who is he? Another time traveller?”

“Another time traveller, you said?” asked Clara, smiling broadly before she elaborated on her answer. “He’d be really pissed if he ever heard that… Oh no, he’s not. He’s the time traveller. You
and I, we’re just his friends. And from what I’ve been told,” she added, narrowing her eyes as she put a hand on top of Rose’s, “you are really very important to him, Rose, or else you would never have been brought here in the first place.”

After Clara said those words, there was a short silence during which she could see that Rose was struggling to understand and ultimately to believe her.

“I was just gettin’ back ‘ome,” she finally said, looking down. The thought had suddenly hit her that Clara might help her make sense of what had happened to her if she simply told her everything she knew. “I was almost there really, I had just climbed up the stairs and taken my key from my pocket when I found ‘im there again right in front of my door – this drunken bloke in a really long brown coat I had just seen in the street.”

That’s it, Clara thought. The words ‘long brown coat’ were all she had needed to hear. Still, Rose kept saying she had never met him before this very day, and when she did, just instants after he saved her from the executioner’s sword, the experience had been absolutely terrifying for her. But that man at her door? That had to be the Doctor! Who else could it have been? Unless…

Oh, she suddenly thought.

Unless!

“He was smiling at me, so I smiled back,” Rose went on, “but then I thought, how can ‘e be here? I’d passed ‘im by in the street and gone up three flights of stairs, so how could ‘e be standing right at my door? How could ‘e have got there before I did? How come I hadn’t seen ‘im? Then he lifted his hand and there was this thing coming out of it, like blue lightning or something… Whatever it was, it hit me in the face, and the next thing I know, I’m locked up in that dungeon.”

“And that man who brought you here,” Clara said when it became obvious that Rose had finished her side of the story, “was it the same man who rescued you this morning?”

“Have ya heard a single word I’ve said?” asked Rose, slightly upset. “Yeah, it was the same man, but I don’t think ‘e was tryin’ to rescue me at all. He must’ve been tryin’ to trick me into some other thing… Blimey, it felt so good when I got to smack him this morning!”

“Well,” said Clara, “I’m sorry to disappoint you, Rose, but I think the man you smacked this morning wasn’t the same man you found at your door.”

“You’re joking, right?” said Rose with a frown.

“No, I’m afraid I’m not,” Clara told her. “The man that rescued you from the scaffold was the Doctor, your friend.”

“That bloke was the Doctor?” asked Rose incredulously. “And you still want me to believe he’s my friend? He kidnapped me, Clara!”

“I don’t think he did, Rose,” Clara added, slightly shaking her head.

“Ya don’t think ‘e did?” asked Rose, confusion written all over her face. “Well, who did then?”

“I think it must’ve been a Zygon,” said Clara, slightly raising her eyebrows.

“A what?”

“A Zygon,” Clara repeated, “an alien creature who looked just like him.”
Rose spent a few seconds silently staring at Clara and wondering whether she might just have been a looney all along.

“First you said ‘time travel,’” she said slowly, marking the last two words, “and now you’re talking aliens…”

“Aliens exist, Rose,” said Clara, nodding as her eyes widened. “The Doctor himself... He’s an alien.”

“And you’re seriously expecting me to believe that, right?” said Rose, snorting.

“Well, if you can’t believe that, then I guess you’ll never believe the lengths he’s gone to to save your life this morning.”

In spite of the reservations that for obvious reasons she still had regarding this Doctor person, who Clara insisted had not been the one to actually kidnap her, Rose couldn’t deny that the last words her new friend had just said had unexpectedly filled her up with curiosity. Even if this was just insane from beginning to end, there was one thing she was absolutely sure of in the middle of all that chaos. Someone had most certainly tried to kill her that morning, and whether she liked it or not, it was true that she was still alive because the man in the long brown coat, who by the way had not been wearing that coat anymore, had tried and stopped them.

“What did he do?” she asked.

“Not really sure I should tell you yet,” Clara answered.

“Oh please,” she told her. “I wasn’t ready for any of this, Clara. Who in their right mind would? Still, I’ve come to believe the time travelling part. I just… I guess I just wasn’t expecting aliens to be a part of this madness too!”

Clara smiled. Oh, Rose was clever. No wonder she’d been travelling with the Doctor at all!

“Well, he went to the past, the Doctor,” Clara explained. “I mean, further back in the past, to 1536, and rescued the Queen’s mother, Anne Boleyn, from the Tower of London on the morning of her own beheading. You know who Anne Boleyn is, right?”

“Who doesn’t?” said Rose frowning.

“My students, for instance,” Clara answered.

“Are you a teacher?” Rose asked her.

“Yes, I am.”

“Good! I know who she is though,” Rose said. And then, realisation finally hit her and she stayed silent for a moment, very deep in thought. Anne Boleyn’s had been the name her eyes had seen carved in the stone every single day and night she had spent locked up in the Tower of London, but she would never have imagined that the scaffold that had awaited Anne Boleyn at the end of her life was to be awaiting her as well until she found herself standing on it. “That was why the Queen had me locked me up in Anne Boleyn’s dungeon, right? I was meant to have my head chopped off just because that was the only way to save her mother’s!”

“Well, not really,” Clara answered, “although that was a very good conclusion to come to. Anyway, the reason why you were meant to have your head cut off was that Queen Elizabeth wanted to take revenge on the Doctor.”
Once again, silence filled the room, and while it lasted, Rose kept wondering how on earth her connection to an alien, however well-travelled, could really be so strong that Queen Elizabeth I of England nonetheless had actually wanted to kill her just to upset him, whereas Clara kept thinking that maybe, just maybe, she was giving Rose more information than she could handle for the time being.

Rose was finally about to say something when, quite unexpectedly, the door burst open and Queen Elizabeth I entered the room. The two young women literally jumped from their seat as they watched the sovereign stride towards the bed and then stand next to it once she had reached it. She barely spared Clara a single glance. Her sunken dark eyes, which had been reddened by tears, kept staring at Rose, who could tell, as did Clara, that she was breathing with difficulty.

The two twenty-first century women thought that tears would soon start flowing from the monarch’s eyes again, but they were wrong. What happened was that Queen Elizabeth’s legs gave in and she slowly descended to the floor to end up sitting upon it in such a way that it made them think that, possibly for the first time during her reign, the Queen of England had kneeled down in front of her subjects.

“Lady Rose,” she said unexpectedly as her eyes kept staring at hers, “as suggested by my old acquaintance Edward de Vere, Seventeenth Earl of Oxford, by Lord Boeshane of the Boeshane Peninsula, and by whatever best judgement remains in my head, I have come to offer you my sincerest and most profound apology. It is true, and therefore I have no intention to deny it, that I have spent this last month making preparations for the day of your execution, which should have been a day of celebration. Certain accidental events that were entirely beyond my control have ensured that this day shall remain a day of celebration after all, but for what I intended to do to you, madam, I am deeply sorry. Thus, as of this moment, I give you the title of the Lady Rose Tyler. Please consider yourself to be one of our most dearly loved friends at the English court.”

Rose’s and Clara’s jaws had long dropped to the floor.

“Okay,” Rose simply answered.

“Is there anything I can do to make your ladyship’s stay at Whitehall Palace more comfortable?” the Queen asked.

“No, thanks. I’m fine,” Rose answered. “Oh, hang on… Can I have a bath?”

“A bathtub has already been requested,” the Queen answered, “and it is, at present, being brought to this chamber, my lady.”

“Thanks,” Rose answered.

“Thank you very much, Your Majesty,” added Clara, getting up from the bed and helping Queen Elizabeth to get back on her own feet. “That was really thoughtful.”

Now that she was standing up again, Queen Elizabeth bowed lightly to both Rose and Clara, and without further ado, she turned around and left the room.

“Blimey,” Rose said, looking up at Clara, “this is still not a dream, right? That really was Queen Elizabeth I apologising for trying to kill me…”

“She was, my lady Rose,” said Clara as a broad smile appeared on her face.

Immediately afterwards, the door opened again and a bunch of servants came in. They pushed a portable bathtub into the room, which they left in front of the fireplace.
“Thanks, guys,” Clara told them as they turned around to leave the room. Walking in the direction of the door, she took the fresh cloths, the bedlinen, and the nightgown they had left on top of a table and put them carefully on the armchair.

“You want me to help you?” she asked Rose.

“It’s okay, I’ll be fine,” Rose answered. Clara had assumed she would get up from the bed immediately, but she didn’t. Instead, she turned her face in Clara’s direction, and looking at her intently, she asked her a new question. “Can you tell me more about ‘im?”

“About the Doctor?” asked Clara.

“Yeah,” said Rose.

“Sure!” answered Clara. “Although, trust me, he’s a very tricky subject to talk about. Where do you want me to start anyway?”

“At the beginning I guess,” Rose told her. “I mean, who is ‘e? Really?”

“It’s a long story,” said Clara, feeling suddenly relieved by the fact that she knew how to answer Rose’s question. Well, sort of at least. “He comes from a planet called Gallifrey.”

“Never heard of it…,” said Rose.

“No wonder…,” Clara answered. “Neither had I.”

“Guess you met ‘im on planet Earth anyway, right?” asked Rose jokingly.

“Yes, I did,” answered Clara, “but since the day I met him, he’s been taking me to all these other planets and galaxies... It’s been incredible!”

Rose’s eyes brightened up as they kept staring at Clara’s.

“Really?”

“Really,” said Clara softly. “And of course, we’ve travelled in time too.”

“And what’s it like, travelling with ‘im?” Rose asked then.

“Travelling with him?” said Clara. This time, her eyes were the ones that started to sparkle. She knew the answer to this question too, but for the time being, she could find no easy way to put everything she wanted to say into words. Still, he had to try. “Well, travelling with him is… Unlike any other thing you may have done before.” She went silent for a moment to try and pick her next words as carefully as she possibly could, but as the right words failed her once again, she worded her feelings towards what it was like to travel with the Doctor as simply and as clearly as she thought she could. “It’s everything, Rose. Travelling with him is everything to me.”

*****

Everyone at court would have expected Queen Elizabeth to be comfortably seated on her majestic throne in the Privy Chamber during her audience with that couple of men who, strangely enough, called themselves ‘the Doctor’. The Privy Chamber was the room where Elizabeth I had always
granted audience to and entertained every ambassador, prince, or king that had ever been invited to court during her reign. This time, however, the sovereign had shocked each of her courtiers and servants when she dismissed all her ladies-in-waiting and then, without uttering single word to explain, she strode past the Privy Chamber and rushed into her bedchamber, followed not only by those two strange-looking men, but also by a lady dressed up in Lord Boeshane’s clothes that she had brought with her from the Tower. To make matters even worse, as soon as the party walked into the royal bedchamber, Queen Elizabeth turned around and locked the door.

Rumourmongers soon started to do their job, of course. After enamouring the Queen, Lord Boeshane had disappeared, and Queen Elizabeth had gone out searching for him only to return to Whitehall Palace, bringing with her a pretty young woman who incidentally happened to be wearing Lord Boeshane’s outfit. What could that possibly mean if not just one thing? Lord Boeshane had seduced that young lady as well but unfortunately for him, Queen Elizabeth had found out, and she was now either going to make the lady confess her sin or ask the Doctors to testify as witnesses before her guards escorted the two lovers to the Tower! After all, that was exactly what she had done about twenty years before, when she had learned of the affair that one of her suitors was having with one of her ladies-in-waiting. There was only one loose end, the most observant courtiers and servants claimed. If the Queen was planning to send Lord Boeshane and that young lady to the Tower, wouldn’t it just have been easier if she had left them there? Or could there be any reason why she had decided to take them to Whitehall Palace with her first? She might have been planning on publically ridiculing Lord Boeshane, but what about the lady? Nobody at court seemed to know who she was!

Such rumours would keep spreading at court for the rest of the morning, but the Doctors and the two women keeping them company in the Queen’s bedchamber were completely unaware of them.

“Had you not closed the door of you spaceship so hastily, Doctor,” Elizabeth told the Tenth Doctor, “the arrow that got stuck on it would have killed you on your previous visit to my kingdom.”

“Judging from what you’ve tried to do today,” said the Tenth Doctor, “I have absolutely no doubt that it would’ve.”

“When you never returned after our wedding, at first I thought you had died,” she went on, sitting on the edge of her bed with her swollen eyes staring into space. The two Time Lords stood right opposite while Anne Boleyn kept pacing the floor restlessly behind them. “I spent weeks and weeks believing myself to have instantly become a widow, until one night a Zygon told me everything about you – the Doctor, the saviour of worlds, the Time Lord from Gallifrey. That was when I knew you would never come back.”

“It was all a very big mistake, Elizabeth,” said the Tenth Doctor apologetically. “We should never have got married.”

“Our getting married was not the problem, Doctor,” the Queen replied. “The problem was that you dared coming back!”

“That’s precisely what I meant,” the Doctor interrupted. “I’m sorry, Elizabeth, but the truth is I never loved you. I just happened to stick around for a while ‘cause I was looking for Zygons and they turned out to be at the British court, but that was it, and although it’s true that I asked you to marry me, it was just a trick ‘cause I thought you were one of them. I’ve forgotten what happened next, but… The fact remains that I agreed to marry you, and it was really foolish of me to do so. I had no right to play any games with your feelings, and I apologise for that.”

Surprisingly enough, Queen Elizabeth snorted after she heard the Tenth Doctor’s words.
“Play games with my feelings, sir?” she asked him, amusement written all over her face. “And how exactly did you do that?”

“Well,” said the Doctor, frowning in sudden confusion, “you had feelings for me… And I abandoned you…”

Queen Elizabeth snorted again. She stared silently at the Tenth Doctor for a second until, suddenly taking her hands to her mouth, she started to laugh, and laugh and laugh and laugh she did until she cried and her side ached, all in front of the stunned gazes of the two Time Lords.

“I am afraid it is I who must apologise this time, my dear man, but this is just so good to be true!” she said as she regained some of her composure. Indeed, she seemed to be having the time of her life, the Doctors thought. “I am extremely sorry to disappoint you, Doctor, but I never had feelings for you. Did you seriously believe that I had fallen in love with you? If that be the case, I regret to inform you that I did not! The only reason why I made eyes at you and married you in such haste was the fact that I was trying to avoid another diplomatic conflict with my cousin Mary.”

Neither husband nor wife had realised, but the Eleventh Doctor certainly had, that with every word Queen Elizabeth said, her mother seemed to be becoming more and more restless.

“Your cousin Mary?” asked the Tenth Doctor, frowning. “As in Mary Queen of Scots?”

“Mary Stuart and I always had a troubled relationship,” she started to explain as she crossed her arms over her chest.

“Oh yeah, you tell her about that,” the Tenth Doctor cut in.

“There was a time, however, when I believed we could let bygones be bygones if she were to marry an English nobleman, someone in whom I had the utmost confidence, so I tried to make my dear friend Lord Robert Dudley accept her hand in marriage. That way, England and Scotland would have been able to call a truce at long last! My dear Robert,” she added as her delicate fingertips started to draw circles on her arms. “He was the only man who ever really loved me, Doctor! I loved him too, so very dearly! Unfortunately for both of us, the conflicts started by our ancestors proved to be much more powerful than our will to get married.”

“That’s true!” the Eleventh Doctor shouted excitedly and unexpectedly as he pointed a finger at her. “I saw it on a film!”

“Chinny,” said the Tenth Doctor, “this is hardly the right time to talk about films, don’t you think?”

“I remember this day I went to pick Clara up but she had a cold,” the Eleventh Doctor explained, “so I stayed over and we watched a couple of films and… Well, I remember you and Robert Dudley looking all lovey-dovey in one of them, Your Majesty.”

“Let me see if I got this right,” interrupted the Tenth Doctor, elbowing his future self in the arm in an unsubtle attempt to persuade him to stop talking. “Just because you couldn’t marry Robert Dudley, you decided he’d be better off if he married your cousin?”

“It would have been convenient,” she answered, marking that last word. “But dear Robert just would hear none of it, and my cousin refused to marry him as well. She thought I had gone insane! That was when I decided that, in order to set an example and quell all the rumours, I would have to get married first.”

The Doctors opened their mouths with the intention of saying something, but no sound would
come out of them at all, so they just gawked for a brief while.

Eventually, the Tenth Doctor asked the question that had been burning inside his throat almost since the very beginning of Queen Elizabeth’s tale.

“If you never really loved me,” he said, his voice full of anger and incredulity, “why then hurt someone I love? Why that desperate need to have a young innocent girl killed so that you could take your revenge on me?”

The sound of Anne Boleyn’s incessant footsteps right behind him had just made the Eleventh Doctor suspect that there might be something wrong with her, and when he turned his head around to look at her, the look of pure terror on her face made him realise that his suspicions had not been unjustified at all.

Queen Elizabeth’s eyes suddenly went astonishingly wide, as if she had just become aware of the folly and the horror of the words she was about to say.

“When you reappeared last year, Doctor,” she said, “I felt I was being greatly insulted. Did you seriously think that you could simply return to my kingdom after marrying me and disappearing nearly forty years before, and that nothing would happen? Did you actually believe that you would be treated with total impunity? No, Doctor! No man had ever laughed at me and not been punished for doing so. I simply did what I had to do.”

“And what was it, exactly?” asked her the Eleventh Doctor, turning his head from the mother to the daughter once more.

“Forty years ago, you both came and took the Zygons’ only means to travel in time,” she said, and no longer had she finished that sentence that the Doctors realised she was referring to that spherical crystal-like device that the Zygons had used to translate themselves into those Gallifreyan 3D paintings. “However, after four decades of research, by the time you came back last year, Doctor, when that arrow failed to kill you, they had finally managed to develop new time travelling technology, so I sent a Zygon after you when you left, and I gave it clear instructions that it should hunt down and bring me back whatever it was that you loved most. I had been expecting it to come back with your spaceship, Doctor. Imagine my surprise when he came back with a woman!”

There was another long silence in the room, but once again, as he sauntered towards the Queen, it was the Tenth Doctor who broke it.

“Not all Zygons are clever,” he said, “but you definitely sent a clever one after me.” Probably the cleverest of them all, he thought, since it had been able to understand what the brief instant he had spent on the Powell Estate the night of January 1st 2005 had meant to him. “So there he was all the time, possibly on my own ship, am I right? Lurking in the shadows and waiting to find out which of all the wonderful things in the universe would be most precious to me. And when he did, he stole it.”

“I am afraid I do not know the particulars, Doctor, but I understand the Zygon had to take your own form at some point in order for his mission to be successfully accomplished,” Queen Elizabeth added.

The Tenth Doctor stood silently just for one second, which was the time it took anxiety to rapidly build up in his stomach and quickly spread all over his chest. At last, he understood, and while he still could not be brought to thinking that this had not been his fault, at least he seemed to be coming to terms with the fact that maybe he was not entirely to blame.
And at long last, he knew really well what he had to do and would not run away from it again.

“I need to see her,” he said unruly as he turned to the Eleventh Doctor. “I have to go, Chinny. I need to see her now!”

“What are you waiting for then?” the Eleventh Doctor asked him.

“You,” answered the Tenth Doctor.

“I’m not going with you, Sandshoes,” the Eleventh Doctor told him.

“What?” asked a truly surprised Tenth Doctor. “But Chinny, I need you with me!”

“And I’m with you, Sandshoes,” the Eleventh Doctor told him. “I’m with you all the way and I always will be. I’m just not going with you. This is something you need to do without me, and you know it. Besides, looks like someone else in this room might be in need of some comfort.”

As he said those words, the Eleventh Doctor quickly turned his head around to look at Anne Boleyn, whose back was turned on them as she silently looked out of the window.

“Where is she?” asked the Tenth Doctor.

“Right upstairs,” his future self answered.

“Right upstairs?!” exclaimed the Tenth Doctor as tears started to well in his eyes. “Why didn’t you say that before?”

“’Cause I wanted to make sure you wouldn’t run away from her again when you found out,” the Eleventh Doctor answered as a smile curled up his lips.

“I shall take you to her, Doctor,” Queen Elizabeth told him, nimbly getting up from her bed. “I suppose it is the least I can do.”

“Go to her, Sandshoes,” the Eleventh Doctor told him. “I’ll catch you later.”

“You’d better,” the Tenth Doctor told him as his eyes were taken over by the most emotional gaze his future self had ever seen.

And then, ignoring Queen Elizabeth’s kind offer, the Tenth Doctor turned around and rushed out of the room.
Anne of the Thousand and One Days

Chapter Notes

Thanks to my dear beta NoPondInTheForest! Baby, you're the top! ;-) I'm posting the next chapter today too in order to make up for the four-week wait. Thanks for reading guys! Hope you'll enjoy them :-)

The heavy doors of the royal bedchamber closed with an extremely loud banging sound the moment Queen Elizabeth I rushed out in order to chase down an unstoppable Tenth Doctor.

Not even then, the Eleventh Doctor noticed, did Anne Boleyn flinch, but of course, it was only natural. Merely hours before, the disturbingly frayed thread that this woman’s life had been hanging by had nearly been completely torn. Now, however, not only was she safe and sound – she was also under the protection of Queen Elizabeth I who, apart from being her daughter, was also the most powerful woman in the country.

It wasn’t all a bed of roses though. Elizabeth was now really far from being the two-year-old child that had been taken away from Anne a couple of weeks before. Instead, she was an old lady who, to her mother’s eyes, must have born little or no resemblance whatsoever to the little girl she was sure to have loved and adored.

The question that seemed most important to the Doctor and what he had spent some time wondering by now was, was Anne Boleyn aware of any of those things at all?

“Ms Boleyn?” called the Doctor, his voice loud and clear as he sauntered towards her. “Can I call you Anne?”

The sound of her own name coming out of a stranger’s mouth proved to be effective enough to bring Anne’s mind back from whatever the place her own anxious thoughts had taken her to. Turning away from the window, she looked up at the Doctor with big dark eyes that were still tainted with fear. She didn’t say a single word, and the Doctor, as was his custom, took that as a yes.

“There’s no need to be afraid anymore, Anne,” he told her, a small smile curling up his lips as he stopped and stood in front of her. “You’re safe now. No one here means you any harm anymore.”

“That was the thing my rescuers said upon entering my dungeon, sir,” she answered in a manner that suggested she was at long last starting to wake up from a terrible dream, “but I chose not to believe them.”

“You chose not to believe them?” the Doctor asked with a smirk. “And yet they rescued you, didn’t they?”

“Did they, my lord?” she asked him defiantly. “Am I now truly safe? A king once made me his queen, sir, and not even then was I safe. As fate would have it, it would seem that by marrying him all I did was put my dear family and myself in a most terrible danger.”

Indeed she had, the Doctor silently agreed. After a twenty-year marriage to Queen Katherine, his
brother’s widow, King Henry VIII had literally moved heaven and earth to be allowed to divorce his wife and marry young Anne Boleyn, a lady-in-waiting he had been madly in love with for nearly a decade, in a time when divorces were little else than a rumour. After and endless series of obstacles and countless diplomatic conflicts which resulted in a break-up between England and the Catholic Church, Henry eventually succeeded in his plans.

Being finally free to do as he pleased, it seemed that nothing would have pleased him more than to banish Katherine as far away from the British court as possible, and also to disown their daughter Mary. He literally gave everything up to be able to marry Anne, which only made it all even more incomprehensible when, scarcely three years after their wedding, he grew tired of her and repudiated her. By that time, his intention to marry his new love interest, the lady Jane Seymour – ironically, one of Anne’s ladies-in-waiting –, was widely known by everyone at court except possibly Anne herself.

Probably owing to the fact that it had taken him nearly a decade to be granted a divorce from his first wife, Henry must have decided that he would not have that happen again, and what better way to be speedily parted from his second than to have her accused of adultery and treason, and possibly even sentenced to death?

Unfortunately for Anne, her misfortunes had not ended there. The King had also considered it reasonable that the rest of her family should also participate in her downfall, and so her father, Thomas Boleyn, was banished from court, whereas George Boleyn, her younger brother, was also tried and beheaded in the Tower two days before Anne’s alleged execution date.

“I know you’ve been through a lot lately,” said the Doctor soothingly, “but this is a safe place now, trust me. Like a sanctuary.”

“Like a sanctuary, my lord?” she asked, her eyes widening slightly. “And would this sanctuary have also protected my brother had he been taken here as well?”

Under any other circumstances, the Doctor would have said yes, but right there and then, it would have been nothing but cruel.

“I used to have a brother, sir” she went on, her eyes overflowing with tears as she did. “Do you happen to be acquainted with what his fate has been?”

The Doctor wished he hadn’t been, but much to his regret, he was.

“I’m really sorry about your brother, Anne,” he told her as his eyes darkened.

“I could not protect him, my lord,” she said, looking down as tears started to fall from her eyes. “Can you imagine how I felt, sir, locked up in a dungeon whilst awaiting my own fate, when suddenly one morning I heard the crowd roar and understood that his dear head had just been severed from the rest of his body? I was there, sir, a surprisingly short distance away from him, and I was the Queen of England! Still, I could do nothing to save him. He had always been by my side, my dear George, but my side had unexpectedly become a dangerous place to be by. He was never safe, my lord, and neither was I. And if a Queen can be safe in her own kingdom, then safety must be but just an illusion. What I believe, my lord, is that no human being is ever safe.”

The Doctor would have loved to have something to say to contradict her, but the truth was that he didn’t.

“Well, maybe you’re not entirely wrong,” he told her, feeling that much of the kind of sorrow Anne Boleyn had been describing as she spoke of her brother was not entirely unfamiliar to him. “Maybe
no one’s really safe and it’d be stupid to think otherwise. But even if that’s true, it doesn’t necessarily follow that one’s constantly in danger instead. And you, Anne Boleyn, the queen of the thousand days, you are certainly not in danger anymore.”

“And why would that be, sir?”

“Because your daughter Elizabeth happens to be the Queen of England now, and knowing her as much as I do, I can assure you she’ll do everything in her power and beyond her power to protect you.”

“It is utterly impossible for my poor Elizabeth to ever become Queen, my lord,” she told him. “Only days ago my marriage to the King was declared null and void, sir, and my daughter illegitimate. She has therefore been removed from the line of succession.”

“Oh that’s true! I’d forgotten that part!” he suddenly exclaimed, raising a hand and pointing a finger at her. “Very Henry VIII, don’t you think? That man... There was no messing with him! Still, you know what, Anne?” he asked as she kept staring at him incredulously. “History didn’t care. It’s true others had a go before Elizabeth even had a chance, but eventually your daughter became the Queen of England.”

“Are you completely insane, sir?” she asked him, disbelief and confusion written all over her face. “Do you think so little of me as to believe me foolish enough to even conceive the idea that, during my half-month imprisonment, not only did my husband abdicate and my daughter become queen, but that there has also been a succession of impossible kings and queens dancing around the crown of England?”

The Doctor gaped as he locked eyes with her.

“Oh Anne,” he finally said. “You have absolutely no idea what’s really happened to you!”

“I do, sir,” she said, nodding repeatedly as she inhaled deeply. “People at court... They talk, my lord. I know of my husband’s infidelity and I know what Jane Seymour’s and her distinguished family’s intentions have been all along, my lord.”

“That’s what the Tudor court’s always been all about, isn’t it?” said the Doctor. “Vested interests and power plays with a king or a queen trapped at the core. But that’s not what I was talking about. Come with me, Anne. I want to show you something.”

Anne’s gaze darted from the Doctor’s eyes to the Doctor’s arm as he offered it to her. Her eyes then travelled back to his and stared at them for a moment, until she eventually hooked her arm around his own, if only hesitantly. Smiling softly at her, the Doctor reassuringly patted the small hand that was curled around his elbow, then led her out of the royal bedchamber and into the Privy Chamber. An instant later they stepped out of that room as well and found themselves walking along one of the countless and opulent corridors inside Whitehall Palace.

Soon enough, something strange-looking and definitely out of place at the other end called Anne’s attention.

“Can you see that thing over there, Anne?” the Doctor asked as they kept walking in its direction.

Anne glanced at the object again, and as they were both now standing right in front of it, she took a moment to examine it closely with curious wide-open eyes.

“It appears to be a strange-looking blue cubicle, sir,” she replied pensively, and stepping aside to get a different perspective, she went on. “There are white windows at the front and at the sides,
possibly at the back too, and the light coming from the interior is brighter than any other light I may have seen before.” The Doctor smiled, but he said nothing. It was plain to say she hadn’t finished yet. “There are some inscriptions as well, sir, but even though they are in English, I am not sure that I can completely understand the meaning of such words.”

“Well, not bad,” said the Doctor, clapping his hands as he rubbed them together excitedly. “Would you like to see what’s in there?”

Forgetting all about the conventions of her time, Anne Boleyn was about to say yes when an unexpected sound that seemed to be coming from behind that rare blue object startled her. “Did you hear that, my lord?”

“Did I hear what?” asked the Doctor, who was so excited about what was about to happen that he had not been paying any attention to anything else at all.

“That one, sir,” Anne said, fixing her eyes on his as soon as the same noise became audible to her ears again.

“Oh!” exclaimed the Doctor upon finally hearing it. “That’s nothing we should be worried about, Anne! It’s just some smooching.”

“I beg your pardon, sir?” she asked in confusion.

And then, a male voice interrupted her right before she asked what the meaning of the word ‘smooching’ was.

“Hi Doc!” Anne and the Doctor heard someone say. Immediately afterwards, Captain Jack Harkness, who was still wearing Anne’s grey dress, emerged from behind the TARDIS, and an instant later, a flustered and blushed Edward de Vere emerged from behind Captain Jack Harkness. “I didn’t expect you to come back so soon!” added the former Time Agent. Darting his eyes from the Doctor to the former Queen of England, Jack winked at her as he gave her one of his trademark smiles. “Hello to you too, my gorgeous Annie! Feeling better now?”

His sense of composure and decorum had made Edward gaze down as soon as Jack stepped outside their hiding place, and for as long as his new and exciting friend spent greeting the green-eyed Doctor, he had felt too shy to look up. However, the moment he heard Jack address some other person by the name ‘Annie’ and understanding that ‘Annie’ could be no other but Anne Boleyn herself, Edward lifted his head and stared at her. Then, taking a few steps in her direction, he bowed, after which he spoke to her gently.

“My lady Anne,” he said to her in utter amazement, “this is a most unexpected and welcomed honour. My name is Edward de Vere, madam, and as of today, please consider myself to be your most humble and devoted servant.”

“Are you gonna go in there, Doc?” Jack asked the Doctor, pointing with his thumb at the spaceship behind him.

“Yes,” the Doctor replied with a smirk and a frown.

“Oh,” Jack muttered with obvious disappointment. His eyes, however, soon darted to the majestic door at the opposite end of the familiar corridor, and then he asked the Doctor a new question. “Is there anybody in the Queen’s chambers right now?”

“Not anymore, no,” the Doctor answered lifting his eyebrows.
“Thanks, Doc! I owe you one!” Jack told him with a wide grin. Then he reached for Edward’s hand and urged him to follow him. “See you later, guys!”

And with those words, Edward and Jack dashed along the corridor.

“How is that man, sir?” Anne asked the Doctor as they both heard the heavy door of the Privy Chamber slam.

“The one that’s wearing your grey dress? That’s Captain Jack Harkness,” the Doctor answered. He seemed to relax a bit then, and he was actually smiling before he added one more thing about Captain Jack. “An old and dear friend.”

“I know who that gentleman is, my lord,” Anne told him. “He was kind enough to introduce himself upon entering my dungeon.”

“Oh yes, of course he did,” said the Doctor, smiling softly again as he rolled his eyes.

“I meant the other gentleman, my lord,” Anne said. “Who is he?”

“Oh, the other gentleman?” the Doctor asked her. The thought suddenly crossed his mind that Anne Boleyn couldn’t have known a single thing about William of Stratford, which of course would make his answer much easier and infinitely shorter. “That was Edward de Vere, arguably the most remarkable playwright in the history of human kind.”

“I have never met him or even heard of him,” she asked, frowning slightly, “but the way he kept looking at me, sir… It felt as if he had known absolutely everything about me.”

“Well, he probably did. He probably knows everything about everyone else in this world, too,” answered the Doctor as he smiled softly. And then, turning to the TARDIS again, he asked Anne the very same question that Jack and Edward had unintentionally prevented her from answering.

“Well, what do you say now, Anne? Would you like to see what’s in there?”

“Provided it is not meant to hurt me or hurt someone I love, yes, my lord. I would.”

“It’s not,” said the Doctor, after which he snapped his fingers.

“Oh, my stars! Sir, are you a wizard?” she asked him in wonderment as her eyes darted towards him.

“A wizard?” answered the Doctor grimacing. In his mind’s eye, he saw the face of his dear friend Donna Noble, and he couldn’t help but smile. “Of course I’m not! Why would I be a wizard? I’m so much better than that!”

“But the door… How did it open?”

“It’s okay, Anne,” he told her. “Never mind the door. What is important right now is that you get in.”

Anne had been somewhat excited about the secret hidden behind the doors of the mysterious blue cubicle, but at this moment, for some reason, she seemed to be slightly panicking.

“But why would I want to go in there, sir?” she asked, her eyes fixed on the door that had been opened for her.

“Because it will change your life,” the Doctor whispered in her ear.
It had been only days before that Anne had promised herself never to trust other people. Not that she would have had much time left to make that mistake again anyway. Right now, however, and for some reason she couldn’t quite grasp, she was finding it just impossible not to trust this young man who seemed and sounded so honest, who was being so extremely kind to her, and who seemed to understand what she was going through, something not many others had had the ability to do in the past.

Having made her mind up at last, she turned her head from the door to stare briefly at the Doctor. After smiling softly at him, she turned around again and went through the door.

As soon as she stepped inside the TARDIS, her unbelieving eyes started to dance around the console room, and while marvelling at every colour, every beam, every sparkle and light and sound inside it, she fought hard to try and regain her breath.

“Anne Boleyn, welcome to all of time and space,” the Doctor said from behind her as his back rested on the doorframe.

“Oh sir, what is this place?” she asked in wonder as her eyes kept travelling in all directions.

“It’s my ship,” said the Doctor, smiling the way he always used to smile whenever the time came to explain the things his beloved ship could do. He entered the console room as well and stopped right behind Anne, and as he started to speak about his beloved spaceship, his tone became as passionate as nothing Anne herself had ever heard before. “It’s my ship, Anne, but it doesn’t travel across seas. It travels in time and space, which is infinitely much bigger and exciting. If you wanted me to, I could show you any of the billions of billions of billions of billions of planets in the universe. I could take you to the past and show you how the Tower of London was built five hundred years ago, or I could take you to the future and show you how there’ll be absolutely nothing left of it before this planet is engulfed by the sun in about five billion years. But most importantly, Anne, I can show you how this is not the year 1536 anymore. This is the year 1600, and your daughter Elizabeth, apart from being a lady of a certain age, has also been the Queen of this country for over forty years.”

When the Doctor spoke of her daughter, realisation finally struck her.

“That woman in the Tower…,” she said as she turned around to stare at the Doctor. “She looked at me and called me ‘mommy’… But she can’t be my daughter, my lord! I refuse to believe that she is!”

“And why would you do that?” the Doctor asked her frowning.

“Why would I do that?” she asked incredulously. “Did you not hear the things that lady said before, my lord? That could be no daughter of mine… That must have been a beast unleashed from hell!”

“And were you not like her once, Ms Boleyn?” asked the Doctor. “Her conduct may not have been exemplary at all times, but she never had it easy either. You know what it’s like to be a queen, don’t you Anne, when those around you are only wolves in sheep’s clothing.”

“I shall not deny the fact that I have been no angel, sir,” she told him. “However, although I may have been like her once, that is not what I want to be anymore, my lord, and as of today, not how I want to live my life – provided that I have, in fact, been gifted with another chance to live it.”

A soft smile appeared on the Doctor’s face as he spoke.
“You have, Anne,” he told her, putting both hands on her shoulders. “You really have. And how you choose to live from now on is your decision and yours alone. But it’s only fair that you know who your daughter is, ‘cause old as she may look, deep inside her there’s still a lonely child who grew up in fear because her mother was not there to protect her. You saw what she was hiding inside her ring, didn’t you?” Anne didn’t say a word, but her eyes gazed down by way of an answer. “She’s been wearing that ring every single day of her life for nearly seventy years. She’s always loved you and needed you, Anne.”

“But she is not a child anymore, sir!” Anne snapped. “The way she spoke to you and my gentleman saviour before, oh that spoke how much she is not a child! Instead, she sounded like a ruthless monarch, probably because her own father became one himself near the end of his life! Am I not right, sir?”

“Well, you’re not wrong I guess,” answered the Doctor.

“Precisely!” Anne said, her eyes filled with rage and fury. “I do not wish to be loved or needed by someone who is powerful enough to inflict the most incredible pain and misery on others, sir. As regards pain and misery, I consider I have already had more than my share! If there is anything I want right now, my lord, it is to run away from this place that I once used to call home… To run away from these people! And given that the greatest misery imaginable was inflicted on me and my family by someone I loved deeply, I want to devote the handful of days I may have yet to live to try and relieve the pain of those upon whom the same sorrow has been inflicted.”

Once Anne finished talking, the Doctor realised that her words had filled him with such awe that they had rendered him speechless. It wasn’t until she collapsed and he quickly took her in his arms that he found himself capable of responding to her plea.

“Oh Anne,” he said he grabbed her by the elbows. “Have you heard yourself just now? That was… Absolutely out of this world!”

“I want to leave this place, sir,” Anne said again as tears started to fall down her face. “I want to leave this place right now!”

“Listen to me, Anne,” said the Doctor. “Let me show you one more thing… Just one more thing! Let me take you somewhere else. If, after that, you still want to leave, I’ll let you go. What the hell, I’ll even give you a ride! But please, let me take you somewhere. I really need to do something, and I think you’d love to do it with me.”

Trying hard to regain her composure, Anne brushed away her own tears with her hand. Once again, she found this man so honest and so true that it was impossible for her not to do what he had just asked her to.

She didn’t say a word, but the Doctor’s eyes went wild with joy the very second she nodded. Happy as a lark, he planted a kiss on her forehead before he let go of her and rushed to the console, where he started to pull levers and press buttons. Anne kept looking at him in astonishment, and it took her a while to get back on her own two feet and ask him a new question she suddenly wanted to ask.

“Where are we going then, sir?”

Lifting his eyes from the console for just one second, the Doctor looked intently at her and smiled before he replied.

“To the Tower of London.”
The next time Rose opened her eyes, the room was in complete darkness but for the amber glow coming from the fireplace. Ignoring the trance-inducing softness of her fresh new nightgown and the bed linen caressing her skin, her restless conscious mind immediately started to ask her questions. How could it be night time already? And seeing that it unquestionably was, then how long had she been sleeping? The permanent state of confusion she had lived in during her imprisonment in the Tower of London had not even let her drowse for the past four weeks. Hence, her days in the Tower had been nothing if not long, and her nights full of inconceivable and outlandish questions that seemed to escape all logic! Something resembling peace of mind only had seemed to come after having had that balmy and longed-for bath in the morning, and when sleep eventually took over her wearied body and her drained mind, Rose simply gave in. Had not been for the fact that Clara had insisted she should absolutely eat some of the fruit on the brimming tray a servant brought in before she went back to bed, she would probably have gone to sleep much earlier.

As the image of Clara sitting on the armchair next to her bed got pictured in her mind, Rose wondered whether she would still be there with her. Knowing that there was only one way to find out, she sat up and turned to the opposite side of the bed. Much to her surprise, Clara was not in the room anymore. However, her place on the armchair had been taken. Rose could not see who had actually taken it, but she could definitely see a male silhouette. The light of the fire was twinkling right behind his head, making him look like some ancient deity, but also turning him into nothing more than a sinister dark shadow. Be that as it may, since the moonlight entering from a window on the other side of the room was beaming directly on his long thin legs, she immediately recognised the blue-pinstriped pattern embedded in the fabric of his brown trousers.

So soundly had Rose been sleeping all day that she hadn’t noticed the Doctor had been sitting on that armchair since noon.

Earlier that day, when he first entered that room, he found Clara sitting on the windowsill, facing the bed. She immediately turned around when the door suddenly burst open, and upon seeing him coming in, she gave a loud sigh of relief.

“Oh Doctor,” she had whispered, getting up from her seat and tiptoeing towards him, “am I not happy to see you!”

The Doctor smiled softly, and as soon as he did, his eyes darted from Clara to the human figure lying in bed with her back turned on them. He didn’t say a single word, but Clara could read on his face how worried he had gotten at all once, so she spoke again to calm him down.

“You don’t need to worry about her, she’ll be alright,” she murmured. “She just needs some rest and some food. In fact, Doctor, seeing that you’re now here, why don’t you stay in for a minute while I go to the kitchen and bring up some soup? You can use the sonic to heat it up when she wakes up, right? The Doctor – the other Doctor – he took my jar of wine back at the Cheshire Cheese and then he…”

The Doctor didn’t let her finish. All of a sudden, he wrapped his arms around her and drew her close to his chest. Both he and Clara remained silent for a moment – as far as Clara was concerned, because she knew really very well that on this occasion talking was not necessary, and as far as the Doctor was concerned, because he was carefully trying to choose the right words to say to the woman who had contributed more than anyone else to saving Rose Tyler’s life that morning.
“Thank you, Clara,” he finally whispered, “thank you for not giving up on her. If you hadn’t tried so hard to get back to the Tower in order to save her, oh, I don’t even want to think about what would’ve happened to her!”

“You did your share to save her too, Doctor,” she said, smiling softly.

“I just did what I had to do,” he murmured.

“That’s what you’ve always done, isn’t it?” she asked him, pulling away a little. “That’s what you must always do, Doctor.”

When Rose unconsciously moaned upon rolling in her bed, the Doctor immediately let go of Clara and dashed to her side. For the first time since he had entered that room, her face was visible to him, so he set his thunderstruck eyes on her. Once he had done so, the words his future self had said earlier that morning came back to him like the tide comes to the shore, loud and powerful, and when the tide finally washed away, the fortuitous outcome of the accident bow-tied him had caused by seeking his help after being threatened by Elizabeth I became obvious in a trice.

That, he had finally come to understand, was to admittedly be his last chance to hold her hand, and to say goodbye, and to tell her how much he loved her. He had to leverage these few borrowed hours to say and do all the things he had never said or done to Rose Tyler.

The Doctor remembered trying to exhale, but the lump in his throat had refused to let the air from his lungs reach his mouth. Taking Rose in, he sauntered towards the armchair and took a seat, and that was the way he remained for hours and hours. He never noticed when Clara sneaked out of the room, or how absolutely no one else dared come in thereafter. And yet, he didn’t move from that chair at all. He simply stayed there as he watched Rose sleep, or musing over the rhythmic intervals of her breathing, or taking delight in the shades that the shifting rays of sunlight were casting on her shape. And then, when the sun finally set, he feasted his brown eyes in the way the orange glow coming from the fireplace kept dancing on the white skin of her face.

Now that Rose was finally awake and looking back at him, the Doctor’s hearts were bubbling over with such joy that he thought he might just die and never regenerate again.

Letting his elbows rest on his knees as he clasped his hands, he leaned forward closer to her, and when the same moonlight that had made it possible for her to recognise part of his clothing shone down directly on his face, Rose almost skipped a heartbeat when she noticed his eyes were sparkling with tears from the very second they looked into hers.

“Hello Rose,” he almost whispered.

“‘Ello Doctor,” she said softly as she sat up straight. “Sorry about the smack.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” he said smiling. “Every cloud has a silver lining... In fact, that smack helped me rule out the thought that you might’ve been an impostor! No one could’ve smacked me like that unless Jackie Tyler were their mother.”

Rose’s eyes widened in surprise when the Doctor mentioned her mother’s name. If she was to believe this man to really be a friend of hers, a reference to the power underlying a slap given by the one and only Jackie Tyler definitely was a very good place to start.

“You’re not an impostor either, right?” she asked him. “’Cause last time we met ya sort of were one.”

In his mind, the Doctor pictured the moment when a Zygon had taken his form to get to Rose and
kidnap her. Ironically enough, he had been there all along, hiding in a street corner from where he had seen her getting back home at midnight on New Year’s Day 2005. When he moaned in pain, she turned back and talked to him. She had been worried about him at first, but the moment she wished him a happy new year, her smile became so full of light that, for as long as she kept smiling, all the pain was gone. She turned around to check on him one last time upon closing her door, by which time, his tears had joined the rest of him in his goodbye.

And all the while, a Zygon had been lurking, waiting for him to be gone so that he could lay its fingers on her. He had been there and not noticed, and so, he hadn’t been able to do nothing to stop it.

“I’m really sorry you’ve had to go through all this because of me, Rose,” he told her. “That thing should never have brought you here.”

“And ya weren’t supposed to bring Anne Boleyn ‘ere but ya did, didn’t ya? Guess ya guys are even then,” she said, the smile on her lips even wider than before. “What’s happened to that long brown coat of yours?”

“Oh, good question… I think it must’ve burnt! Who told you about Anne Boleyn?” he asked in astonishment.

“Clara did,” she answered. “She also told me you’re an alien and a time traveller.”

“She was right – I am,” he said. “An alien and a time traveller.”

“And what am I to you?” she asked expectantly.

The Doctor stayed silent for a moment. How could he possibly answer that question? Should he tell her the whole truth? It didn’t matter how clever or open-minded she had already proved to be – this version of Rose Tyler still had not really met him. How could he possibly tell her she had been everything to him? That he had thought he would die the day a parallel universe stole her away? That he had actually wanted to die the day he had truly believed he had no choice but to leave her trapped there again, only that this time it would be forever?

How could he tell her that, earlier that day, if for some unexplainable reason he had happened to get to Anne Boleyn too late, he would gladly have given his own life to save hers?

“Well,” he eventually started, clearing his voice, “not sure this is what you want to hear, but once you said you were my lucky pants.”

“No I didn’t!” she exclaimed, blushing.

“Yes you did!” he teased her, his eyes widening as he nodded. “Right after we left ancient Rome!”

“We’ve been to ancient Rome?” Rose asked him, her beautiful eyes narrowing in disbelief.

“Oh yes!” the Doctor answered, grinning as he jumped out of the armchair and sat cross-legged on the floor right in front of her side of the bed. “To cut a long story short, I’d been turned into stone but you managed to bring me back from the stony. Oh, that was really clever… You were brilliant! Mind you, I think it’s interesting to point out that you’d also been turned into stone and that I’d brought you back to life first. Thing is, while all that was going on, I popped by the Renaissance and made a statue of you with a little help from Michelangelo. I called it Fortuna ‘cause, to be honest, you’ve always brought me luck, and when I told you, you came up with that!”

Rose gaped at him seemingly incredulously, but soon she realised that, in spite of how incredible
that story might have sounded, she believed him. She truly believed him. Maybe it was because of the way he had seemed to be overcome by his own tale, or maybe just because of the sparkle she had seen in his eyes all the while.

They were beautiful by the way, those warm brown eyes, or at least they looked so in the cold white moonlight.

So did his smile.

“Clara said Elizabeth I wanted to kill me ‘cause she wanted to ‘urt ya,” she told him.

“Wish I could tell you she was lying when she told you that, but I’m afraid she wasn’t,” the Doctor told her.

“Guess we must be really good friends then if they brought me here just to piss ya off…,” she said.

“Not really, no. We’re not good friends,” said the Doctor, shaking his head as he smiled imperceptibly. Rose frowned in shock because that was not the answer she had been expecting to hear, but before she could tell him so, the Doctor went on. “We’re so much more than that, Rose Tyler.”

That was more like it, she thought. That was the only answer that made any sense in the middle of all that nonsense, even if it inevitably opened a whole new set of questions.

“And what are we, Doctor?” Rose asked him without hesitation as her eyes narrowed.

“The last time someone asked that question,” said the Doctor, who had finally decided what the best place to start was, “I said we’re what legends are made of.”

Rose kept staring at him in silence, and the Doctor watched as she pushed the bed covers aside and nimbly slid to the floor, where she sat on her legs right next to him. None of them said a single word. The Doctor was too busy trying to stop his arms from enveloping her, and Rose was busy wondering why, despite the fact that this man was an alien to her in every possible sense of the word, she was feeling so inevitably drawn to him.

“The first time we ever met,” the Doctor eventually said, “or at least the first time we met properly, you were running away from some shop window dummies that were trying to kill you.”

“Shop window dummies?” she asked, snorting.

“Oh yes!” answered the Doctor. “They were chasing you in the basement of that shop you used to work in, and when I found th…”

“Wait a minute!” she interrupted. “Ya just said ’a shop I used to work in’? Ya mean I don’t work in that stupid shop anymore?”

“Of course you don’t!” the Doctor answered. “Or soon you won’t, more like! Anyway, when I found those dummies were chasing you, I took you out of there and made sure you were safe. As luck would have it, we met again the next day and joined forces against them. Then you turned out to be really clever and great help, so I invited you to come travelling with me and you accepted. Did I mention I blew the shop off, by the way?”

“So ya just asked me to go with ya and I said yes? Was that it?” she asked.

“Well, not exactly…,” said the Doctor. “You actually refused at first, but then when I mentioned
that my ship could travel in time you made your mind up pretty fast! Oh, the look on Mickey’s face… You should’ve seen him. He looked quite ridiculous!”

“Oi!” she protested. “Don’t say that! Mickey’s a great guy!”

“Of course he’s a great guy!” said the Doctor. “You think I don’t know that? We may have had our differences at first, but these days, oh I just love him! Saw him a couple of days ago by the way and there he was, happily fighting aliens in the company of his wife!”

“What?” Rose asked in surprise as her eyes widened. “Ya mean Mickey and I get married? Like, in the future?”

It was curious, the Doctor thought, that the notion of Mickey Smith spending his future days fighting aliens had not sounded preposterous to Rose’s ears at all, and yet the idea of her marrying him had turned out to be something she had absolutely not expected to hear.

“Well, I’m not so sure about you, but he definitely does,” the Doctor told her. “To Martha.”

“Who’s Martha?” Rose asked after the Doctor dropped the bombshell.

“Martha Jones,” he said, wondering why he had not stopped to reconsider before telling her so much. “She used to travel with me.”

Rose was rooted to the spot.

“Oh, that’s nice of ‘im,” she finally said, visibly cross. “Blimey, so ‘e visits one day, I introduce ‘er and then ‘e leaves me for her!”

“Well, actually, it wasn’t like that,” said the Doctor. “Not even remotely.”

“Then how was it?” she asked with a frown.

“You’d sort of left him first,” answered the Doctor.

“Oh,” she said, and for the first time since her cross-examination had started, she didn’t look the tiniest bit surprised. “And why did I leave ‘im?”

That was the moment when an unexpected voice came uninvited from behind the bedroom door – and it was a singing one.

Oui, c’est elle,
C’est la déesse,
Plus charmante et plus belle!

Oh, this is so not happening, the Doctor thought, and turning to the door, he shouted.

“Oh for goodness’ sake, Jack! Step away from that door, will you?” he said in an attempt to make the singing stop which ended up proving quite effective.

“Just trying to lend you a hand there, Doc!” Jack answered.

“Who’s that?” Rose asked the moment Jack’s footsteps as he turned around and walked away became audible from the interior of the room.

“Captain Jack Harkness,” the Doctor told her. “Haven’t you met him yet?”
“No I ‘aven’t,” she answered.

“Thanks goodness,” the Doctor murmured, raising his eyebrows as he sighed with relief.

“That was French, right?” Rose asked him.

This time it was the Doctor who remained pensive and silent. The last time he had seen the TARDIS, it had been parked at the end of a corridor only a floor below, so how come it had not translated that song for her?

The treacherous moonlight revealed that the French singing had made the Doctor blush, and Rose felt extremely relieved and thankful that there was a fireplace in that room. As it happened, she had also blushed the moment the obvious answer to the question ‘why had she left Mickey’ revealed itself to her. The only straw she could clutch to in her hope that the Time Lord from Gallifrey had not noticed was the thought that the reddish orange gleam of the flames had been ceaselessly reflecting upon her face.

“Doctor, can we open the window? S’really ‘ot in ‘ere!” she said, then blushed again even more intensely. If that had been an attempt to break the coy silence, the words she had chosen to do it had been the worst possible ones.

“Yep! Excellent idea!” answered the Doctor, jumping on his feet and motioning towards the window. He could also feel the heat as much as Rose herself did, and for exactly the same reasons.

Rose smiled timidly. From her place on the carpeted floor, she had the chance to take a proper look at him for the first time since she had woken up and found him in her room. He was really very tall, really very slim, and he moved with great dexterity as he drew the curtains aside and kneeled on the windowsill, then grabbed and turned the knob and eventually opened the window.

“Thanks,” said Rose, her eyes fixed on him as he looked out of the window for a moment and breathed the fresh air coming from outside. “I’ve spent the last month locked up in a closed room and I really need that window to be open!”

“Such a lovely night,” he said as he turned his face to her and a big smile appeared on his face. Then he turned around and scanned the room, obviously looking for something, but what it might have been, Rose couldn’t tell at all.

The Doctor’s eyes suddenly stopped searching. Having found what they had so eagerly been looking for, he strode to a chaise longue in front of the fireplace, and stretching an arm, took a cushion from it. Rose thought he must have been feeling uncomfortable while he was sitting on the floor, but when he silently sauntered towards her, he crouched down and offered the cushion to her, his eyes never looking away from her as she took it and placed it underneath her. Rose then thought the Doctor would sit on the armchair again, but he didn’t. He turned around once more and walked towards a small table beside the room door. Rose couldn’t see what he was doing, but she could hear the sound of a liquid as it was being poured from one container to another. When the Doctor turned around and moved in her direction once again, she saw he was carrying a jar in his hand, and sitting in front of her, he offered it to her as well.

“I reckon you could use some water too,” he said, tenderly looking at her.

“Thanks,” she said as her lips curled up into a soft smile.

“Better?” he asked softly after she took a long sip.

“Yeah, thanks.”
Despite their previous blushes and coyness, for a while they did nothing but stare and smile softly at each other.

“Why did the Queen want to ‘urt you?” Rose eventually asked.

“Well, it’s hard to explain,” the Doctor told her. “I think she was just trying to prove a point.”

“And what was it?” Rose asked.

“That no one should ever mess with her, I guess,” answered the Doctor.

“She must be really thankful now that you’ve brought ‘er mother back,” said Rose.

“Oh yes she is, though I’m afraid things aren’t going to be easy for any of them,” he told her.

“Anne Boleyn’s been through a lot lately – false accusations, the rejection from a husband who wouldn’t hesitate and send her to the scaffold just to get rid of her and marry another woman, the executions of her brother and some of their best friends, and then her own imprisonment in the Tower and an imminent death sentence… And now, out of the blue, she’s been brought here, over sixty years into the future, and reunited with a daughter she can’t even recognise, ‘cause the last time she saw her, maybe only a couple of weeks ago, she wasn’t even three years old, and now, as if by magic, she’s turned into someone who’s twice her own age… Sounds like an awful lot to deal with, doesn’t it?”

“So much for culture shock…,” said Rose with a frown.

“As for Queen Elizabeth herself,” the Doctor went on, “she was so young when she lost her mother she can’t really remember much about her. And even if she did, Anne Boleyn has been nothing more than an adulterous and a traitor for decades to everybody else, so Elizabeth’s spent nearly all her life trying to prove to everyone around her she was Henry VIII’s daughter and no one else’s, pretending that her own mother had never even existed…”

“Is there anything we can do to ‘elp ‘em, Doctor?” Rose asked him.

The Doctor froze instantly. It was just for a moment, but it felt like ages to a really worried and clueless Rose.

“There,” he finally said, smiling softly. “There you are, Rose Tyler.”

“What?” Rose asked, gaping. “What is it? What did I say?”

“You wanted to know what you are to me, didn’t you?” he told her. “Well, that was it. That was exactly who you are. From the moment we first met, you’ve been the girl who will always do her utmost to help others, no matter how mean they may have been to her first. You’re the girl who can never find a reason to hate anyone.”

“I pretty much hated you when I smacked you this morning, Doctor,” she said, reaching for her upper teeth with the tip of her tongue as she smiled again.

“Still,” said the Doctor, “something’s telling me now you don’t hate me anymore, do you?”

“No,” said Rose, suddenly putting a hand on his and squeezing it gently while, inside his chest, the Doctor’s hearts started to jump because of the way she was looking at him. “No, I don’t suppose that I hate you now.”
I'm terribly, terribly sorry this has taken so long and I promise I'll be updating much sooner the next time! Hope you haven't lost interest in this, guys! Thanks to my dear friend NoPondInTheForest for being always there! There'll probably be three more chapters to go.

Dawn had hardly broken when Clara was woken up by the incessant sound of footsteps bouncing up the stairs and all along the corridors. Wondering what all that noise was about, she opened her eyes and fixed them on a purple cushion placed on top of the windowsill. Still, she didn’t make any attempt to wake up.

It had been a rollercoaster of a time for her lately. From the moment she found herself trapped in the TARDIS while it was picked up by an army helicopter under the orders of Kate Stewart, events succeeded each other so unbelievably rapidly that at no point had she been allowed to slow down in any sense - let alone a physical one. It was not surprising in the slightest that exhaustion was finally taking its toll.

Following the slamming of a door somewhere, there was a brief moment of silence during which slumber soon took hold of her again. Later that day, she would have sworn she had been sleeping for a couple more hours. And yet, a new surge of feet stomping in all directions and doors slamming everywhere had reawakened her scarcely ten minutes later. As her eyes now shot open, she found there was no purple cushion for them to rest upon. A certain someone’s backside happened to be resting upon it, and in common with the feathers stuffed inside the cushion, his body was also covered mostly by purple fabric.

“Doctor?” she said instinctively as she sat up in bed.

“Hello, Clara,” said the Doctor, smiling tenderly at her.

“I wanted to wait up for you,” she said as she brushed her eyes with the back of her hand, “but I guess I was too tired. Where have you been?”

“Oh, just out there somewhere,” he replied as his dreamy innocent eyes wandered about the room.

“Out there somewhere with Anne Boleyn, right?” she added in between yawns. “Well, if Captain Jack hadn’t seen you, Queen Elizabeth would definitely kill you now you’re back, no fair warning this time.”

“Oh well, I guessed she’d be quite cross at first, but I think once Anne’s spoken to her, she’ll be… Oi! Wait a minute! What’s Jack got to do with it?”

“She was worried sick about her mother, Doctor!” she started to explain. “While she was cross-examining nearly everyone at court we realised you’d disappeared too, and that was when Captain Jack showed up and said he’d seen you take Anne Boleyn with you in the TARDIS. Then he
suggested you might’ve taken her back in time so that she could give Henry VIII a punch in the face, and that was when the Queen actually seemed to start to enjoy it!”

“Bet she did! But why would I take her to the court of King Henry, for goodness’ sake? That’s really stupid! Oh no, we didn’t do that. We just went out there for some fun.”

“What kind of fun?” Clara asked him, narrowing her eyes as her lips curled slightly up. “Doctor, I know that look.”

“What look?” the Doctor asked.

“That look!” she answered, jumping out of bed and pointing a finger at him. “You always have that look on your face after you’ve done something everyone else will think you shouldn’t have done but which you actually felt great doing.”

“It was great fun, I’ll grant you that,” he told her, getting up from the windowsill and sauntering towards her. “Now, Anne Boleyn… Oh Clara, you should’ve seen her. She’s had the time of her life!”

“Still, you won’t tell me what you did,” she remarked.

“Well, it’s not like it can be kept secret for much longer I guess. I took her back to the Tower…”

“To the Tower?” said Clara gaping.

“Yes, to the Tower,” he said, then took a moment to put his hands on her shoulders, “and we may accidentally have set some of the prisoners free. Well, not really accidentally. And in fact, not just some, but probably all of them.”

He had been quite nonchalant about it. The truth was that from the moment he and Anne Boleyn had started to run like mad along the endless murky corridors of the Tower of London unlocking dungeon after dungeon and taking everyone to their safety, the Doctor had tried and failed to remember ever having done anything as exhilarating.

Clara stared at him in silence for a moment. She was pale and motionless, possibly in a state of shock, and for a moment, even the Doctor started to worry about her. Gradually, however, colour returned to her cheeks and motion to her tense features. She had never told the Doctor about it, but the truth was that the uncertain fates of the men, women, and children she had unknowingly contributed to putting back in the empty dungeons of the Tower of London had not stopped tormenting her for a single second, in spite of Anne Boleyn, the princes in the Tower, and the rescue of that girl who had turned out to be one of the Doctor’s companions.

Apparently, a very special one.

Knowing as she did now that the Doctor had put all her worries to an end, she turned around and sat back on the bed. The Doctor walked towards her and knelt down in front of her. No sooner had he done so than she quickly slid from the bed and reached out to wrap her arms around his neck.

“Thank you,” she whispered in his ear. “Thank you so much for that!”

She hadn’t even noticed, but a warm and voluminous tear had just fallen from her eye.

“Anne Boleyn seemed to be having some trouble coping with everything that’s happened to her lately,” said the Doctor as he tenderly wrapped his arms around her and let his chin rest on her head. “I just wanted to help her! I believe in second chances, Clara, and since Anne Boleyn is
going to have one, it’s only fair for all those people in the Tower to have their chance too, regardless of whatever they may have done to end up in there. Which, by the way, given this is Tudor England, might have been something as simple as stealing some food so that their children could eat! Whatever they did, Clara, I just couldn’t leave them there. And I knew for a fact that Anne Boleyn would be more than willing to help me set them free.”

“Bet she did,” said Clara softly against his chest. “I would’ve loved to help too!”

“I knew you would,” said the Doctor, pushing her even closer to him. “And I’m sorry I left in a rush and didn’t tell you about my plans, but everything happened so fast!”

“It’s okay, Doctor,” she whispered, “I’m glad you’ve done what you’ve done.”

“I thought about you all the time, you know,” he added. “I really couldn’t wait to come back and tell you right away!”

Clara thought she would forever cherish the words the Doctor had just said, and why she didn’t actually revel in them was something that not even she could understand.

“You still haven’t seen Rose then?” she surprisingly found herself asking, as if someone else had put that question in her mouth while she was sleeping and, now that she was awake, it had turned out to have a life of its own. Nowhere to turn to now. It was too late. “She woke up soon after you went searching for the other Doctor.”

“She did, didn’t she?” the Doctor said casually. Then, nodding repeatedly with raised eyebrows, he pulled away slightly, and putting his hands on Clara’s shoulders again, he looked at her intently before he went on. “And is he still with her?”

“Is he still with her?” said Clara, raising her eyebrows as she took her arms off his neck. “I bet he is. He went into her room yesterday afternoon, and as far as I know, when I went to bed last night, he still hadn’t left!”

“Good,” said the Doctor, nodding repeatedly as he got up. “Good, oh that’s really very good.”

“Don’t you want to go and see her too?” Clara asked, getting up as well.

“Oh, I’ll go later,” he simply answered. “There’ll be plenty of time for that.”

“Are you sure?” she asked him.

“Yes I am. In any case, it’s not like I’m missing it, is it? I’m technically there with her now.”

Taking a few steps towards the window, she kept talking as he listened behind her.

“Well, I guess technically you are, but if this works the same way your interference in the Time War did, and somehow I believe it does, then technically this you won’t have a clue about what’s going on with her unless this you decides to go and see her.”

“I don’t need to go and see her to know exactly what’s going on with her,” he said, turning around to look at her. “And even if I didn’t know, Sandshoes could give me all the details later. Besides, I’m busy! There are things I need to do and things I need to think about, and I don’t think having Sandshoes jabbering by my side all the time is going to help me come up with a plan.”

“A plan?” Clara asked surprised as she also turned around to face him. “Doctor, you never come up with any plans. Things just sort of happen with you. And what do you need a plan for now,
when it’s all over now and everyone’s safe?"

“One can never be safe when there are Zygons around, Clara,” said the Doctor, in a fruitless attempt to change the subject.

Clara, of course, knew so much better than to fall into his trap.

“Well, if now Zygons are the new menace, luckily enough Captain Jack and the other Doctor happen to be quite handy.”

“Yes, but Captain Jack and the other Doctor also happen to be rather busy for the time being, don’t you think?”

“Can I ask you just one thing?” Clara cut in, and as the Doctor’s eyes widened, she went on. “This is Rose before you actually met her. I know it can’t be easy, but is there any way for her to evade her future?”

“What exactly are you trying to ask, Clara?”

“What I’m trying to ask is, can she actually stay and travel with us?”

Not long before, while sweeping the tunnels underneath the city looking for Clara in the company of his past self, the Doctor had felt his extra four hundred or so years of experience to somehow give him the right to patronize the younger Doctor. The thought that Matchstick Man might have taken the right decision the day he knowingly abandoned Rose Tyler in that other universe and in the company of the half-human Doctor had never even crossed his mind!. And so it was that, with the passing of the centuries, he had always assumed things could have turned out differently whenever he relived that moment in his mind. Now, however, when he was really having a chance to actually make things differently, Clara’s question had made him remember what he inevitably would have to do soon.

Rose Tyler had to be taken back home. There was no way that she could stay at all.

When Clara found that, quite unprecedentedly, the Doctor literally had no words to answer her question, she felt truly sorry to have asked.

“No,” he finally said. And regarding this particular matter, “no” was a word that this version of him had never thought he would say. “There’s no way for her to stay. No way at all.”

“And when are we taking her home?” Clara unexpectedly asked.

“As soon as she’s ready to go,” the Doctor answered, looking down.

“And given that she was a…” Clara paused for a minute, unsure what words to use to convey the meaning she wanted to convey. “A really dear friend, and that you’ve already lost her twice, are you still sure you don’t want to spend any more time with her while you still can?”

“Have you been talking to Jack lately, by any chance?” asked the Doctor, a little bit surprised.

“I have,” she answered. “And we’ve had a very interesting conversation, especially when the one that did the talking was him.”

“Them I take it he has he told you about…,” the Doctor suddenly seemed to hesitate, but after a brief pause, he went on. “He’s told you what Torchwood is, hasn’t he?”
Clara smiled.

“Yes, I’m afraid he’s told me all about Torchwood. Including the battle at Canary Wharf. Which was weird by the way, considering that the other night I teleported to this place, and from the window I could s…”

“I could’ve told you about the battle at Canary Wharf,” the Doctor interrupted, regretting the fact that this new version of him had seldom told his companions much about his past.

“Yeah, I suppose you could’ve, but you didn’t. Neither did you tell me about the role you played the day Planet Earth was stolen or that you were friends with Harriet Jones.”

“That was a long time ago, Clara,” he said, his tone suddenly becoming darker. “That was centuries ago. Things are very different now. For Sandshoes, on the other hand, it’s all still very recent.”

“And what’s that suppose to mean, Doctor?”

“It means that he is the one that really needs to be inside that room,” he said, taking a few steps toward her.

“So he’s the one who needs closure, but you don’t. Is that it?” she asked with a frown.

“That’s what I believe.”

There was a long silence during which the Doctor got slightly worried by the way her eyes had just looked into his, as if struggling to understand something that was way beyond her comprehension.

“I’d like to ask you one more question, Doctor,” she eventually added, “and once I have, I promise I’ll never raise this subject again.”

Clara’s tone as she said those words made the Doctor a bit anxious. But still, what else could he do? Even if he might not like her question or find it to be uncomfortable, he would have to answer.

He would have loved to say “Geronimo”, but he didn’t. He simply nodded.

“If you regenerated tomorrow,” Clara started, his big round eyes looking past his own eyes and into his very soul, “or the day after tomorrow, or at some point when I’m still alive and haven’t been swallowed by a parallel universe, so you can still come and find me, even if many centuries had passed for you, what would you do? Would that new version of you do to me what you’re doing to her?”

“Would I do to you what I’m doing to her? Clara? What on earth do you mean?”

“What I mean, Doctor, is… Would you not want to see me? Would you just run away from me like we’d never even met before?”

*****

After their late midnight encounter, the Doctor and Rose had spent the rest of the night in each other’s company.

Sitting opposite each other on the windowsill, the Doctor had spent most of that time just telling her stories of the fascinating adventures they had had and the unimaginable places they had been to during the time they spent travelling time and space together, and Rose would listen attentively to
each and every single detail in his tales, believing them without reservation. Also for most of that
time, the Doctor had kept trying hard to fight the urge to reach out for her and wrap her arms all
around her, whilst Rose had kept trying hard to fight the impulse to jump up and sit on his lap and
brush his lovely freckled cheek with the back of her fingers.

There was so much they had been preventing themselves from doing all night long that when the
rays of the morning sun caressed them through the glass of the gigantic window, their night-long
conversation had somehow taken them back to where it all had started - the day Queen Elizabeth I
had Rose kidnapped.

“Guess I just couldn’t believe it,” said Rose, pressing a cushion hard against her chest. “I reckoned
it was a bad joke at first, but then days went by and I was still locked up and nobody would come
for me… That’s when I started to reckon I’d gone bonkers… Blimey! Can you hear that too?” she
suddenly asked, narrowing her eyes and looking sideways as they both listened to a stomping
sound coming up from down the stairs. “I know this is the British Court, but isn’t it a little bit too
early for anything to be going on, even ‘ere?”

“Maybe last night’s party finished later than I thought it would,” the Doctor answered in a playful
tone.

“Ya sure nothing’s wrong?”

“Well, something might I guess… Though I seriously doubt Elizabeth I’s having second thoughts
about letting you live,” said the Doctor, turning his head slightly to the left as he looked at her
teasingly, his mouth agape.

“Hey, that’s not funny,” said Rose, throwing a cushion at him right before she started to laugh.

“Of course it’s not funny, it was… It was just a thought!” said the Doctor, taking in his hands the
cushion that would otherwise have landed directly on his face and throwing it back at her. Rose
diverted its trajectory with a quick toss of her hand and sent it flying towards the other side of the
room. “Even if it weren’t, Queen Elizabeth wouldn’t dare hurt you now her mother’s there with
her, and most importantly, now I’m here with you.”

“So what’s happened then? Any ideas?” Rose pressed on, in an attempt to conceal the fact that she
was blushing again and wishing she had never got rid of the cushion that was now lying on the
floor. She definitely could have used it to hide her face.

“Absolutely none,” he answered, shaking his head. “Anyway, whatever it may be, Elizabeth’s
really clever, so I’m sure she’ll sort it out by herself. They’ll let us know if they need us in the end,
and until they do, Miss Tyler, could you please finish telling me the incredibly gripping story of
that young girl who suddenly found herself trapped in the Tower of London?”

“What else d’ya want me to tell ya?” she said, smiling softly at him. “You already know!
Especially how it ends.”

“Oh I do, and I love it. The whole story is absolutely captivating, and also you’re a brilliant
storyteller, but... If I had a chance to rewrite it, I think I’d make some slight changes. For instance,
I’d probably take that really interesting and heroic time-travelling character with an amazingly
prodigious mind so that he’d come to the girl’s rescue much earlier than he actually did. That way
she wouldn’t go to the Tower! Instead, he’d take her to... Oh, I don’t know. Somewhere nice! The
Hanging Gardens of Babylon, maybe?”

“But that place’s just a legend, isn’t it?”
“A legend?” asked the Doctor with a frown. “The most astonishing gardens in the whole of human history? Of course they’re not a legend, Rose Tyler! They’re as real as you and me!”

“So you’ve been there?” Rose asked.

“Yes, of course I’ve been there.”

“With me?”

The Doctor froze in place.

“Oh,” said the Doctor in realisation, looking intently at her as he narrowed his eyes. “Oh, excellent, really excellent question! I’m afraid the answer’s no. But why? I don’t understand! Why did I never take you there? You loved the apple grass on New Earth so… I should’ve realised you’d love the Hanging Gardens of Babylon too… There are apple trees everywhere!”

“And can’t we go now?” Rose asked. “Before you take me home?”

“Oh,” the Doctor whispered, looking a bit downcast all of a sudden. “So you want to go home?”

“No!” Rose shouted, positively startled by the Doctor’s remark. “What I meant was, could we go there before you take me home, whenever it is that you’re taking me hom?.”

“So you didn’t mean today…” said the Doctor, his lips curling up as his breath gradually returned.

“No, I definitely don’t want to go home today,” she answered.

“Good,” the Doctor sighed.

“I like it very much ‘ere. Since I’m not a prisoner anymore, that is.”

“I also like it very much here since you’re not a prisoner anymore,” the Doctor told her. He slowly leaned forward reaching out for her hand, and his fingertips had done nothing but brush the soft skin of her palm when his long fingers curled around it and squeezed hard, locking his regretful eyes with hers. “Oh Rose, I wish you’d never had to go through that nightmare! If only I could, as I was saying before, rewrite the story of that girl, that incompetent rescuer though otherwise extremely talented time traveller would’ve been there for her so much earlier!”

“‘S okay,” she said, squeezing his hand back as she smiled at him sweetly. “The way it’s all turned out, I bet that girl wouldn’t want her story to change, not one bit, so you won’t need to rewrite a single line.”

Both the Doctor and Rose blushed for the umpteenth time, but this time none of them seemed to care in the slightest. None of them seemed to make the slightest move either. They remained holding hands and taking the other in silently with such wonderment and blithe that, although for obvious reasons they would never say, each of them was secretly hoping that moment would last.

Much to their regret, their rapture was soon interrupted by an unexpected knock on the door. Only reluctantly did they let go of the one another’s hand before the Doctor got up and sauntered towards the door. Upon opening it, he found himself standing face to face in front of the Eleventh Doctor, and an ‘oh’ escaped his mouth before the older Time Lord pressed his index finger against his lips, inviting his past self to remain silent. The Tenth Doctor understood that gesture as an indication that something important had to have happened, possibly the explanation to all the unexpected early morning noise he and Rose had heard moments before.
His suspicion was suddenly confirmed by the slamming of a door at the end of the corridor. Sir Robert Cecil had just emerged from his chambers and was staggering along on their way to the staircase followed by some royal guards, and the Doctor thought he didn’t look very pleased.

“No need to worry about Cecil,” the Eleventh Doctor muttered. “It’s all been taken care of.”

The Tenth Doctor’s eyes darted from Cecil to the other Doctor, whose enigmatic remark had just made clear that some degree of secrecy was now mandatory.

“I’ll be right back,” the younger Time Lord said smiling as he turned to Rose.

“Oh,” she answered, grinning in that peculiar way that never failed to make the Doctor’s hearts jump.

Turning to his future self again, the Tenth Doctor walked out of the room and closed the door behind him.

“How is she?” asked the Eleventh Doctor casually.

“Oh, she’s fine,” answered the Tenth Doctor as his lips curled up in what might as well have been his zillionth smile.

“Of course she is,” his future self added, crossing his arms against his chest. “I always knew she’d be.”

“It’s been hard though,” the Tenth Doctor went on. “I thought it wouldn’t be a good idea to tell her absolutely everything about… Oh, you know. Me and… Her. Come to think of it, I’ve basically spent the night trying to decide what to tell her and what not to tell her.”

“And what haven’t you told her?” asked the Eleventh Doctor.

“Not much, really…..,” his past self answered. “Her being missing for a whole year right after we met, or her being there for her dad when he died, or…”

“Or her new parallel dad and her new parallel home,” said the older Time Lord.

“Of course I haven’t told her that,” said the Tenth Doctor. “She won’t remember any of this when she gets back, so what’s the point in telling her everything?”

“You’re right,” said the Eleventh Doctor after a brief silence. “We shouldn’t upset her, should we?”

“Where have you been, by the way?” the Tenth Doctor suddenly asked him. “‘Cause yesterday morning you said you’d be right behind me, and even if this place is massive, I don’t think that’s the reason why you got here twenty-four hours late.”

“Oh, I’ve been busy,” answered the Eleventh Doctor, looking away from his past self. “With Anne Boleyn. I’ve managed to cheer her up a bit.”

“Good for her,” said the Tenth Doctor. “And what’s the matter with Cecil? Is that why everyone’s running around like mad all over the palace?”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” answered the Eleventh Doctor as the sound of people hurrying around started to become audible again, being soon followed again by the sight of Robert Cecil, this time alone and visibly cross.

When the Tenth Doctor turned around to grab the brass ring and open the door, his future self
resumed his talk.

“I gotta go now. I promised Clara I’d take her to the Moon to have some cocktails before this started, and I think she’s waited long enough. I’ll be back for you two soon.”

Upon hearing those words, the Tenth Doctor froze in place, and turning his head around to look at the older Time Lord, he let go of the brass ring.

“Are you not coming in to see Rose?” he asked him.

Both Time Lords went silent for a moment. The younger one could tell that the other was silently trying to make an important decision, but why that decision should be such a difficult one to make, he honestly couldn’t tell.

“Do you think I must?” finally asked the Eleventh Doctor. “Clara thinks I must, but I don’t think I should.”

“Why not?” asked the Tenth Doctor, glowering.

“Well, for starters, because you probably haven’t told her about me, Sandshoes. Have you?”

No sooner had he said those words than the Eleventh Doctor took a few decisive steps towards the door, but as he had been expecting, his previous self stepped aside and placed himself right between them.

“No, I haven’t,” answered the Tenth Doctor, looking down. “It’s not like regeneration’s something has been easy for her to handle in the past, is it?”

“No,” the Eleventh Doctor whispered as his mind briefly travelled back in time. First, it jumped to the moment when Rose Tyler witnessed how the leather jacket version of himself regenerated into the pinstripe one, and then to the moment when said pinstripe version regenerated into himself, and he remembered how, change or no change, Rose hadn’t enjoyed any them. Not one bit. “No, I suppose it isn’t.”

“Still, other than that, there’s no reason why you shouldn’t see her,” said the Tenth Doctor, slowly turning around to grab the brass ring again.

“After you then,” said the Eleventh Doctor while thinking that finally there would be no escaping from seeing the woman whose heart, much to his regret, would get broken again very soon.

The two Time Lords entered the room to find that Rose hadn’t moved from her place on the windowsill. She was looking out of the window, and she knew the Doctor was back the moment she heard the sound the door made upon closing. Her eyes, however, kept staring at the early morningsun.

“My mum’s always had a thing for gold,” she said. “I’ve never really cared much about it, but now that you’ve told me where it comes from, I wonder why they have to make jewels and stuff with it, you know? As if it wasn’t special enough just the way it is, don’t ya reckon?”

As she asked that question, Rose turned her head to the door, and that was the moment she realised the Doctor had not got back into the room alone.

“Hello Rose,” the newcomer said with a half smile.

“Hello,” she said smiling widely. “You must be the one ‘e keeps calling Chinny, right?”
“Yes, I am,” he answered. And then, slightly alarmed, he asked a question as he slightly panicked. “You don’t like my chin?”

Rose snorted.

“What kind of question is that?”

“Oh dear, you really don’t like my chin…”

“Ya kiddin’ me? I do! I like your chin! Now stop it! I only called you Chinny ‘cause the Doctor won’t tell me your name.”

“That’s just because he’s probably forgotten,” said the Eleventh Doctor. “He does that all the time! Probably ‘cause he’s much older than he looks.”

“What? I haven’t forgotten, Chinny!” answered a suddenly very cross and nervous Tenth Doctor. “Rose, this is my friend… Whose name is… His name’s… His name is...”

“John,” finally said the Eleventh Doctor. “John Smith.”

“John Smith! Yes! That’s exactly what I was going to say!” added the Tenth Doctor, quickly snapping his fingers and pointing his index at his future self.

“Well, hello John,” said Rose softly, taking turns to stare at the Time Lord and his friend. “Thanks for helping save my life!”

“Oh, no need to thank me. Sandshoes here was the one that did all the hard work!”

“He wouldn’t have done much if you ‘adn’t been there for him,” she answered with a broad smile.

“It’s great to see you smile like this again, Rose,” he told her.

“Thanks John! You also come from the future, don’t ya?” Rose asked him. “D’you travel with us too?”

“I do,” he answered.

“So it’s the three of us and Clara, but not that Captain Jack Harkness… Where’s Clara by the way? I ‘avent seen ‘er since yesterday.”

“Oh, she just woke up,” answered the Eleventh Doctor. “She’ll be back here to check on you very soon.”

“Not if I go to see her first,” she told him. “I’ve been locked up in rooms for over a month now, and I reckon I could really use some fresh air.”

“That’s an excellent idea,” said the Tenth Doctor, grinning wildly at her.

“Thing is,” started the Eleventh Doctor, “there’s someone else who’ll soon be up here to see you too.”

“Who?” Rose asked. “Who is it?”

“A certain lady who’s pretty much alive and kicking again, all thanks to you.”

“It’s okay, Chinny,” said the Tenth Doctor. “She already knows about her.”
“It’s Anne Boleyn,” the Eleventh Doctor finally told her.

“Anne Boleyn?” Rose asked, her eyes widening.

“Yes,” he replied, nodding softly. “Things haven’t been easy for her lately, but now that the storm clouds have passed, I think she just wants to say thank you to very person she owes her life to. She’s probably talking to her mother now, but I can go find her if you want me to.”

“Okay!” she answered, her eyes sparkling.

“Okay then,” said the Eleventh Doctor. “I’ll be right back.”

And with those words, he turned on his heel and rushed out of the room, leaving Rose and the Tenth Doctor alone again.

“Did ya hear that?” Rose said to the Doctor excitedly as her eyes danced in his direction. “Anne Boleyn’s coming to see me ‘cause she wants to say thanks!”

“It would seem so, yes,” muttered the Doctor with a discreet smile. And then, beaming at her, he went on. “And knowing you the way I do, Rose Tyler, I daresay you’re tremendously excited about it…”

“Am I excited about it? How else could I be? Anne Boleyn’s coming to see me!”

And right after she shouted those words, they jumped into each other’s arms and started to laugh wildly and happily, the way little children do.

*****

On the other side of the door, the Eleventh Doctor was looking down from one of the large windows in the long and majestic corridor.

He had left Rose’s room with the intention of rushing out to find Anne Boleyn, but he had merely taken a few steps ahead when, of a sudden, his expression went dark and he abruptly came to a halt.

The thought was there once again, anchored to his very soul, and it would give him no peace of mind. Still, he kept running from it. After everything they had done, how could he not? He simply refused to accept the idea of not being able to keep Rose Tyler with him, whatever the version of him was, and he had never had any better reason to do something in his stupidly long life before. If Rose were to stay with him, then it would have been impossible for him to ever have met her. The incarnation of him that had had blue eyes, noticeable ears and a northern accent would never have found her in that shop warehouse in twenty-first century London, let alone ask her to travel with him.

He hadn’t even noticed, but his mind had frantically started to consider different scenarios, but none of them turned out to bring any good. In the end, his thoughts all led to the same conclusion, and that conclusion was that there was nothing to be done. Nothing at all.

And then a silly but plausible idea suddenly sparked in his brain. “Or maybe there is…,” he thought. It was simple and ridiculous, and definitely not enough, but what if…

What if he just went and did it?

From the window he could see the TARDIS, which was now parked right outside Whitehall Palace, and after spending a few instants devoted to studying the silver lining in his new and
sudden thoughts, as soon as he made the decision, he walked away from the window and rushed along the corridor in the direction of the staircase and headed to the lower floor.

He would go find Anne Boleyn. Then he would introduce her to Rose, and after leaving them both with Sandshoes, he would finally take Clara to have those cocktails on the moon.

And then, he wouldn’t be coming back.

Or at least, not too soon.
La Vie En Rose

Chapter Notes

I'm really really sorry this has taken so long! I had already written most of this story when I started posting, and these final chapters are the ones I'm still writing these days, which is why it's taking me so long to update. I'll try and come up with a new one really soon.

Special thanks to my very dear beta, NoPondInTheForest - don't know what I'd do without you, babe!

On their second night together in the court of Queen Elizabeth I, the Doctor took Rose Tyler to a place she had never been to before.

His resolution to visit that particular place with her was made at the break of dawn – more specifically, the moment he realised that, much to his regret, he had never been there with her. Shortly afterwards, upon hearing Rose herself tell Chinny that she was determined to not spend another day shut inside four walls, his resolution became firmer, and his brain secretly scheduled their trip for that very day. When he and Rose came down for breakfast a bit later that morning, a puzzled Captain Jack Harkness informed them that the TARDIS was gone, but ecstatic as he had been for the last couple of days, the Doctor wasn’t concerned by his friend’s revelation in the slightest. After all, Chinny had told him he would be taking Clara to the Moon to have those cocktails, so he simply assumed they would be coming back soon. Only when the clock struck midnight and the TARDIS was still nowhere to be seen did the Doctor start to conceive the thought that his beloved spaceship might not be coming back any time soon at all.

Fortunately for him, Rose had remained oblivious to his plans all day long. Spending all of the previous night awake had definitely had an impact on her, which meant that, when a solution to the TARDIS-less Doctor’s problem finally magicked up in the form of Captain Jack Harkness knocking at their door shortly after dinner time carrying a tray brimming with fresh fruit, she would still be sleeping for a few more hours. Not that the Doctor was especially fond of the solution he had found, but still, if ever an extraordinary situation had called for extraordinary measures, he was certain no other situation would ever get any more extraordinary than the current one.

“Good morning, Miss Tyler,” said the Doctor when he saw Rose finally waking up right after the clock struck midnight.

“Hi,” she answered, blinking her eyes open to find him sitting on the same armchair as the night before, only that tonight the moonlight was shining directly on his face and that there was a tray full of fruit sitting on his lap. Sitting up straight, she rubbed her eyes with her forearm, and gave the grinning Doctor what he was sure was the most beautiful smile he had ever seen. “Please tell me I ‘aven’t woken up when everybody else’s sleeping again...”

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to disappoint you there. It’s not so bad though, is it? Would you like to have some breakfast?” Before Rose had any time to answer that, the Doctor took an apple from the tray and threw it to her. As he watched her grab it right away and take a hungry bite, he took another one for himself and bit it, then continued to speak with his mouth full. “Still, don’t take me wrong! My people always thought sleep to be little else than a pointless state of mind that only the
brains of the laziest species in the universe are programmed to experience, and although I personally disagree with most of that, I certainly do believe it’s a stupid waste of time.”

Rose snorted.

“So ya don’t sleep then?” she asked as soon as she swallowed the bite of apple she had been chewing.

“I don’t,” the Doctor answered before he took another bite.

“What ‘ave ya be doing all day then?”

“Oh, nothing in particular… Just the usual stuff I guess.”

“And for someone who hardly ever spends more than a few hours in the same place, the usual stuff is…,” Rose said teasingly.

“Oh, you know… I’ve met the Queen and her mother again! As it happens, Elizabeth came to bring us lunch, and then later in the evening Anne came to bring us dinner.”

“What did you just say?” Rose asked with a slight frown.

“Yep! They did!” answered the Doctor, beaming at her. “Not only have you had the greatest monarch in the history of England, but also Queen Mother, bring you your meals on a silver platter to your own private chamber, Rose Tyler! That’s how important you’ve become to them.”

“Don’t be daft!” she said, taking another bite as she watched the Doctor literally devouring his apple. “They didn’t do that for me, they did it for you. You’re the one that’s become really important to them, Doctor, not me. I’m just an accident. You, though… You’ve changed their lives!”

“Only because of you,” he told her, looking pointedly at her as his last mouthful of the sweetest of all apples went down his throat.

‘Only because of you,’ Rose repeated in her mind. For the truth was that, from the moment she’d properly met him the previous night, the Doctor certainly hadn’t tried to conceal what he felt for her in the slightest. He would put those feelings down in words whenever he had a chance, and since he wasn’t refraining himself in the slightest, she was finding it very hard to think of a reason why she should be the one to do that.

Therefore, far from attempting to change the current subject, she decided to add a bit more fuel to the fire.

“So when you said you’d been doing the usual stuff, what you actually meant was you’ve been here with me all day?”

“Of course I have,” he told her as he started to shift nervously in his seat. “Someone had to stay and watch over you, don’t you think? By the way, did I mention that Jack came after dinner and brought us all this fruit?”

“No you didn’t,” she said, smiling broadly because of the clumsy manner in which he had changed the subject. “I like Jack very much! Mind you, he’s a piece of work, but I thought he was as funny as he was cheeky.”

anything he shouldn’t have done?”

“Ya bet he did,” Rose answered, nodding repeatedly and raising her eyebrows as she remembered how that really good-looking guy in a long gray trench coat had put one hand on the small of her back and then slid it further down when the Doctor had introduced him that morning.

“Yeah, of course he did… What was I thinking?” said the Doctor, narrowing his eyes. “Well, I guess that’s Captain Jack Harkness for you.”

“It’s okay, it was nothing I couldn’t handle,” said Rose as she remembered how she had energetically stepped on Jack’s toes when his hand squeezed her backside. “I love Edward too, he’s really nice! When you said he was Jack’s boyfriend, I took it for granted that he came from the future too, so it was a great surprise to see he belongs here! How long have they been tog…?”

“I’ve spent the whole day planning to take you out somewhere tonight, Rose,” the Doctor suddenly interrupted.

“Really? And where are we going?” she asked excitedly as she revelled in how much she loved the way her name sounded in his voice.

“Well, it’s meant to be a surprise, so I’m not telling you just yet,” he answered, his eyes glowing. “The only thing I can say for the time being is that, although I’ve needed to make some variations to my original plan, luckily there’s been no need to change our destination.”

“And can ya tell me what those variations have been?” she asked curiously.

“Yes! That’s no secret!” he answered. “Chinny’s gone away with my spaceship ‘cause there’s this place he wanted to take Clara, so I’ve had to find an alternative means of transport.”

“Blimey!” Rose exclaimed after a short pause. “I’d assumed we’d just go for a walk in the park or something, now it turns out we need a spaceship!”

“Well, not so much a spaceship as a time machine. And as luck would have it, I knew where to find one. Provided this stupid thingy can actually be called a time machine, that is,” answered the Doctor while lifting his left arm.

“What’s that?” Rose asked when she caught a glimpse of the uncommonly big device wrapped around the Doctor’s wrist.

“A vortex manipulator,” the Doctor answered. “Not my favourite choice when it comes to time travel, but still, it’s better than nothing!”

“Okay, so outer space’s out of the question then,” Rose said, smiling as she pressed the tip of her tongue against her upper teeth. “Where are we going then? The past or the future?”

“I’m still not telling you, Rose Tyler, no matter how many times you matter-of-factly try to make me,” said the Doctor, shaking his head. And then, giving her a wild grin, he went on. “But I know you’ll know where we are when you see it.”

Rose smiled again. She felt happy and excited as she had never felt before, and for more reasons than one. The fact that she was about to experience time travel and not against her will for a change was definitely one of them, but that she should do so in the company of the Doctor was even more thrilling. What she had come to feel for him in the mere twenty-four hours that had passed since she had met him properly would have scared her to death under any other circumstances. Under the present ones, however, she just didn’t need a time machine to know what they meant to each other.
in the future, especially when he was being so very close to her, so lovable, and so undeniably in
love with her.

“I reckon I’ll need to get some proper clothes,” she said.

“Well, you know what? You looked wonderful in that thing Anne brought you this morning. Why
don’t you put that on? In fact, where we’re going, I think that’s all you’ll need!”

Rose’s eyes darted to the foot of the bed, where the garment the Doctor had just mentioned was
resting – a large full-length dressing gown made of blue silk on which flowers and diamonds had
been embroidered with silver thread. Anne Boleyn herself had given it to her when she visited her
chamber that morning, and Rose had been wearing it all morning until she went back to bed.

“Oh, okay,” she agreed.

No sooner had she said that word than the Doctor took the tray off his lap and put it on the floor.
Immediately afterwards, he jumped out of the armchair and leaned towards the dressing gown.
Taking it in his hands, he turned to Rose and held it open for her.

“Thanks,” she said, wide-eyed with excitement as she jumped off the bed and walked the three
steps that separated her from the Doctor before she slid her arms into the sleeves.

When she turned around to face him, she found the Doctor beaming again. They held each other’s
gazes in silence for a minute until the Doctor took her hand and placed it around his wrist,
squeezing it gently.

“So this is what we’re gonna use to get out of here, right?” Rose said.

“Yes,” the Doctor answered as he lifted the flap. “Just hold on to it and don’t let go.”

“I won’t,” she said reassuringly. “Can we also use that thing to come back right at this moment
again?”

“We can, if that’s what you want,” he told her. “Any particular reason you’d like to do that?”

“No, just asking,” she said. “It’s great then, isn’t it? We could stay wherever it is we’re going for as
long as we’d like, then we can come back to the moment we left! How cool is that?”

“We could do that, yes,” the Doctor answered, smiling softly. “As it happens, when we take you
back home, we’ll be going to the Powell Estate on the night of 1st January 2005, right after the
moment you disappeared.”

“What I mean is,” Rose cut in, clumsily changing the subject herself this time, ”before you take me
home, weeks, or months, maybe even years might pass and it still wouldn’t make any difference,
right?”

“Well, I think if years passed, it’d definitely make a difference to your mother,” said the Doctor.

“Okay, so maybe not years, but we can still borrow some time, can’t we?”

The Doctor froze momentarily, but only to savour the warmth that had just started to emanate from
Rose’s words. Many were the things he would have wanted to say to her in that moment, and yet,
he didn’t think it was necessary to speak at all. If Rose could read into his eyes just as much as he
could read into hers, she already knew them all.
“Yes,” he said softly. “Yes, we can.”

What happened right after he said those three words might just have been wishful thinking on his part, but he would have sworn he had actually seen Rose sigh with relief.

And indeed, sigh with relief she had.

“I guess,” she said after a brief silence, “if years passed, I’d notice too, wouldn’t I?”

“I’m sorry?” the Doctor asked. “Don’t tell anyone I’ve actually said this, but I didn’t quite catch that.”

“What I mean is,” Rose added, smiling broadly again, “if you age at the same rate humans do, I suppose I’ll also notice when you come back.”

“When I come back where?” asked the Doctor, sounding a bit puzzled.

“To wherever it is I’m waiting for ya in the future.”

As if his brain had reprogrammed itself never to feel anything again after all the pain and loss that this version of him that been through, the Doctor’s thoughts took him back to the moment of his interrupted regeneration. At what should have been the end of the life of his tenth incarnation, there had been no Rose Tyler with him, and maybe that was all he should tell her, plain and simple, without going into any details that would assuredly be too painful for her to bear.

His body, however, had taken a very different route. He had felt his cheeks go white and his knees falter, and everything around him had suddenly become hazy and soon afterwards started to spin.

“Doctor, what’s wrong?” Rose asked, sounding alarmed.

It was such a simple question, he thought. In his many centuries of existence, he had heard the Daleks and the Cybermen and a great many other enemies pose a great many other uncomfortable questions. Had he actually given them answers, their consequences would have been terribly devastating. Yet it was Rose Tyler’s simple question, which would forever linger in his ears, the one that had succeeded in achieving what no Dalek or Cyberman had ever done before – tear his very soul apart.

“Doctor, is everything okay?” Rose insisted.

But the Doctor still couldn’t utter a single word. Deep down inside, however, he was finding no lack of them at all, and the words that were hitting his mind were ones he would use to keep cursing himself for not being able to come up with any answers now that Rose seemed to need one the most. The eyes that had lovingly been looking at him that very day were now staring at him in dread, whether of his persistent silence or of what he might say next, he could not tell.

And yet, the fact remained that he had to say something. He needed to say something! All for her own sake. What should it be, though? What on earth could he tell her? Lying was out of the question, but should he tell her the truth? Could he really do that to her? Wouldn’t it be better to tell her something simple just not to make matters worse?

“Yes,” he finally mumbled. “Everything’s fine, Rose… There’s nothing wrong, I promise. It’s just that…” The Doctor went momentarily silent again, but just for as long as it took him to sit down on the bed and hold Rose’s hand so that she would sit down next to him. In his present shock and confusion, the thought that what he was about to say might cast a shadow over her newly-found happiness never even crossed his mind, or else he would never have said it. “It’s just that, where
I’m going after all this… I’m afraid you’re not there.”

“What d’ya mean I’m not there?” asked a very puzzled Rose. “Where am I then?”

“Not with me,” answered the Doctor, looking down, and as soon as he did, he decided he would say no more. The whole truth, he was sure, would only terrify her.

“Not with you?” Rose asked in astonishment. “How can I not be with you? Doctor, am I dead?”

“What? No!” shouted the Doctor. “No, of course you’re not dead, Rose! Believe me when I tell you you’ve never been so alive!”

“What’s the matter then? Where did I go?” she kept asking, and with each new question, the Doctor’s hearts sank a little bit deeper.

“Well, it’s just that…,” the Doctor started, trying to sound as reassuring and convincing as he possibly could. “Things change, that’s all. Nothing lasts forever.”

“You do,” said Rose anxiously, “you last forever.”

“No Rose, I don’t,” he said, trying hard to avoid her gaze. “Y’see, Time Lords… We’re not immortal.”

‘That’s not what I meant’, Rose was about to say, but she didn’t.

What she didn’t know was that the Doctor knew exactly what she had meant but had pretended to take the wrong end of the stick.

“So where am I gone? Can you tell me that at least?”

“To defend the Earth, I’d assume. That’s what you do these days, Rose. Your shop girl days were over when we met.”

“I…,” said Rose in disbelief. “I fight aliens for a living?”

“Not really, no,” said the Doctor. “I mean, occasionally, yes! But most of the time, you don’t fight them. You listen to them. You understand them, and you try to help them. Also, you save lives. Alien and human. All the time.”

“But not with you,” she whispered, feeling an intense pain building up in her chest.

“No, not with me. Can’t see why that should matter, though,” the Doctor added, trying to put himself together like he had never done before.

“How could it not matter?” Rose asked as a sudden emptiness took hold of her until then gleaming heart.

“Because I was there when you left,” he told her. “And when you said goodbye, you looked splendid, and I can’t think of any reason why shouldn’t still be looking splendid by now.”

And there it was. He had done it in the end. Much as he had tried to avoid it, he had lied to her.

“I…,” Rose started, then stopped for a moment, making a great effort to believe what she was going to say. “I left?”

“Yes.”
“I left you?” she repeated, wide-eyed.

“You did,” the Doctor answered, knowing that those simple words had the potential to make his throat burn – which they did.

“But Doctor, why would I leave you?”

“Oh, ‘cause you sort of… You know. Met someone else.”

“I met someone else?” Rose asked incredulously.

“You did indeed,” answered the Doctor, raising his eyebrows. “Although, if truth be told, I must say I happened to introduce you. Nice chap, by the way, and really very good-looking! Seemed a bit wild to me at first to be honest, but I’m sure you’ve managed to tame him. Shall we go now?”

The Doctor jumped up while Rose remained sitting on the bed feeling terribly childish and stupid. Could that really be true? Had she really fallen for someone else and abandoned the most fascinating creature she had ever met? Well, everything seemed to indicate that she had, so what was wrong with her?!

“Rose?” she heard the Doctor asking from somewhere outside the turmoil of her thoughts. “Do you want to stay?”

Yes, she thought. Yes, I want to stay, and I don’t ever want to leave you... Doctor, I don’t want to go!

“No,” she said instead. “It’s okay, let’s go.”

Smiling softly at her answer, the Doctor got up from the bed and offered her his hand, which she took soon, although with some hesitation.

Standing up in front of him, Rose kept staring at the Doctor as he took her hand and put it on his wrist, then lifted the flap of the object he had called a vortex manipulator. As she wrapped her hand around it, the story he had just told her kept reverberating in her head. Could it really be true or had someone else been messing with her future the way Elizabeth I had messed with her past, she wondered? Because the truth was that she could not imagine any reason why she would ever leave the Doctor, least of all her meeting someone else! She had been terribly scared of him at first, when she met him at the scaffold, but now, scarcely forty-eight hours later, she knew that she was just as much in love with him as he was in love with her, so how was she supposed to believe she would end up dumping him?

“You might want to close your eyes or else you might get a bit dizzy,” he told her, his beautiful brown eyes staring into hers so deeply that she thought she might just lose her senses and faint right there in his arms.

Perhaps if he had hidden his feelings for her she might have restrained herself a bit, but the way he felt for her became really obvious soon enough, and feeling the same way for him, she had done nothing but encourage him. Now, the thought that she would actually be causing him pain at some point in the future was breaking her soul. She had no right to do that! And she certainly didn’t know what the future would hold as well as he did, but one thing she knew that he didn’t know was that she would never forgive herself for hurting him.

And the thought that she would inevitably hurt him right now seemed to her more alien than any other thing in the world.
“Okay,” she answered, shutting her eyelids tightly.

Looking at her in wonderment again, as if nothing had been said to turn their bliss into discomfort, the Doctor smiled and quickly wrapped his hand around hers right after he pressed that one last button, the one that would take them out of sixteenth-century London, and in the blink of an eye, inside a flash of blinding white light, they were gone.

As soon as he felt solid ground under his feet, the Doctor didn’t really need to open his eyes to know they were exactly where he had intended them to be. It smelled of fruits and flowers and wet grass, and the fresh air was filled with the sounds of the water tumbling down and splashing on rocks and of a myriad of birds that were chirping and singing.

“Open your eyes, Rose,” the Doctor told her.

She did, and curious as the Doctor had expected her to be about their destination, she surprisingly gave him and only him her first glance. He noticed it was a sad one, and he knew he was to blame for that. Soon enough, however, her eyes seemed to recover the spark he had so often seen in them, the spark that made them different to anyone else’s eyes, and he secretly thanked the universe for that. This was still his Rose Tyler, and nothing would ever make her sad for too long.

Just because of that, he could have kissed her, but he knew that, deep down inside, Rose was trying to come to terms with the fact that somewhere in time she had broken his heart, so he didn’t.

Indeed Rose wasn’t feeling so sad any longer. How on earth could she? The way he had said those words, the way he was looking and smiling at her, the way his hands were now resting upon her shoulders…

Oh, she could have kissed him. She wanted to kiss him so badly!

“Take a look around, Rose,” he whispered in her ear as he gently turned her around.

The Doctor didn’t want to miss a single detail of her reaction to their surroundings, so he took a step forward and stood by her side, from where he would be able to tell which of the wonderful sights in front of her would catch her eye at every moment. First, it was the magnificent and dream-like ivory-white palace at the bottom, then it was the titillating river behind it and the really high palm trees lined along the river banks. After that, she spent a moment gazing at the waterfalls and the bridge that led the way to the palace, and finally at the river, and the plants, the trees, the fruit and the flowers that descended from the domes to the ground.

Of course, she said to herself, taking a deep breath as she thought that so much happiness would kill her.

“Welcome to Ancient Mesopotamia, Rose,” he told her.

So he had done it in the end, as he had said he would. She was standing right in front of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

Once again, Rose felt the urge to kiss him, and her chest seemed to have decided on its own that it would explode if she didn’t, but as the last thing she wanted was to hurt him any further, in the end she resolved that she’d rather did not.
On their third night together at the court of Queen Elizabeth I, the Doctor and Rose Tyler teleported thousands of years into the past, their destination being the island of Atlantis before it disappeared underwater. On this occasion, the Doctor was extremely careful when setting the coordinates on the vortex manipulator as he just couldn’t risk fortuitously teleporting to Atlantis on the fatal day it was engulfed by a tsunami. The Atlantis he wanted to show Rose was the splendorous one. He wanted to take her on a boat ride along the rivery rings encircling the mainland and walk around its many fine palaces and temples when they finally decided to set foot on dry land. By the end of their trip, there were a few shadows on Rose’s face the same way there had been shadows on Donna’s face when he visited Pompeii with her, but letting that aside, he knew she had inevitably fallen in love with the place.

On the fourth night, they set off for the world of Alfheimr. According to Norse mythology Alfheimr had been the home of the light elves, whereas according to the Doctor Alfheimr was still a home and it would continue to be for as long as Planet Earth orbited the Sun. It was not however the home of the light elves at all. Its inhabitants, the Doctor explained, were some peaceful luminous creatures of astonishing beauty who, being the first aliens ever to get anywhere near Planet Earth, had settled on the one thing that didn’t exist on their home planet and whose beauty they had thus found unparalleled – the clouds.

On their fifth night, after they came back from visiting the Island of Avalon and witnessing the very forging of Excalibur, the Doctor made a decision. As the three places they had visited had blown Rose’s mind away, the Time Lord formed the resolution that they would stick to visiting places Rose wrongly assumed to have been mythological. It was soon however when they started to make the occasional stopover in some or other of the wonders of the world past, present or future, which were soon followed by some of the wonders of the natural world and a few other places the Doctor insisted were truly unique and could only be found on Planet Earth.

This was how in the following weeks they visited the Lighthouse and the Library of Alexandria, the Amazonian Rainforest, Mount Olympus, Icelandic glacier caves, Belgian forests carpeted with blue and purple flowers and which rather seemed to belong in fairy tales, the original Porcelain Tower of Nanjing, the Great Pyramid of Giza, the Ancient City of Petra, The Colossus of Rhodes, the Northern Lights, light tunnels and flower parks in Japan, the citadel of Machu Picchu, glowing caves in New Zealand, the Grand Canyon and many other breathtaking places scattered around Planet Earth and around time itself.

Like everything else between the Doctor and Rose Tyler, the habit of setting off for a new destination every night was also born naturally. With the single exception of their trip to the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the many other trips that followed required no design on the Doctor’s part. He would just wait for Rose to wake up after sunset, and as soon as she did she would find him sitting on the usual armchair. They would smile at each other for a moment before
the Doctor threw a piece of fruit in her direction. As they both ate their own fruit, Rose would anxiously ask him whether John and Clara had already come back, and the Doctor would smile a knowing smile before assuring her they had not. Rose would sigh with relief, then she would tell him what she had been dreaming about.

There were times when Rose would beg the Doctor to tell her about one of his many adventures, just because she loved the way his eyes shone every time he mentioned the TARDIS, and the Doctor would agree to do so just because he loved the way her eyes shone every time he told her one of his tales. The Doctor’s narration would always build up their excitement, and every time his gaze suddenly got lost near the end, Rose would understand that something truly remarkable was being envisioned in his mind. Immediately afterwards he would jump up and offer her his hand, then he would wrap an arm around her and hold her tight against him. Rose would watch excitedly as he lifted up the flap of the vortex manipulator and entered the code that would lead them to a place and time of his choosing, the choice having just been made on the spur of the moment.

After a couple of days of hopping on and off different times and locations on Planet Earth, the idea crossed Rose’s mind that there was absolutely no need to come back to the sixteenth century on a daily basis. Instead she suggested coming back only occasionally to check on Edward, Jack, and Their Majesties Elizabeth and Anne Boleyn. In fact it came as no surprise when the Doctor told her that that had originally been his plan, and one he had firmly held on to until Jack came to their room at Whitehall one morning.

Upon finding out about his friends’ trip to the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the former Time Agent realised that he would also love to take Edward out of Elizabethan England and show him some future landmarks as well as a good number of past ones. Being really keen on keeping the vortex manipulator wrapped around his own wrist, the Doctor suggested that maybe the four of them could just go on some trips together. Jack however had had a better idea. No matter where the Doctor might take her - Rose was just a human being. As such, there would always come a moment when she would feel the need to sleep. It was at those moments that the Doctor agreed to come back so that Edward and Jack could make use of the vortex manipulator and go wherever they pleased, and when the time came for Edward to take a rest Jack would teleport back with him. What the Doctor didn’t tell Jack was that he was determined to cheat. Given he and Edward would never notice how long they had been gone as long as they returned early in the morning, was there any reason why he and Rose shouldn’t spend a couple of days away, possibly three if they just felt like it? He certainly couldn’t think of a single one.

Thus, Rose soon lost track of real time, and as the Doctor had imagined, she never even asked why. He knew that she knew he was doing the very thing she had wanted him to do. He was buying them both time.

*****

It was the small hours of a beautiful early-September morning. Heads tilted against each other, the Doctor and Rose were looking up at the sky as they lay shoulder to shoulder inside a gondola that was being steered along the canals of eighteenth-century Venice by the gondolier’s oar.

This was one of those moments when the Doctor would tell Rose all kinds of fascinating stories of his adventures in space and time, and the adventure he was telling her about this time was the one he had had the first he had visited the rings of Saturn. Then he moved on to tell her all the secrets of Saturn’s and Jupiter’s moons, and before he knew, he had told her all about other solar systems and galaxies, about nebulas and supernovas, about clouds of interstellar gas and dust, about black holes and wormholes.
All the while Rose kept thinking that this was what she loved best. She had undeniably enjoyed visiting every single place and time he had taken her to, but whenever the Doctor’s eyes were haunted by the vastness of the night sky, she felt the urge to explore every inch of that immeasurable universe, but most of all she felt the urge to explore it with him by her side.

Luckily for her, St Mark’s clock suddenly struck two, and its sound helped her wrench her thoughts from that path. From the moment the Doctor had told her the way things were going to end for them, Rose had been fighting with all her might so as not to let the thought that one day she would eventually leave him overshadow the sheer delight of just being with him, of being his friend and keeping his company. Whenever things got a little bit more complicated than they already were, the Doctor would always say or do something that would make her laugh at the right time, and in the end it she always managed to succeed.

Tonight however, being lying down so close to him and feeling his hand squeezing hers, things somehow felt different. Quite different.

The Doctor’s mesmerizing tale of the origins and the reaches of the universe came to an abrupt halt when some unanticipated clouds covered the sky. Only a few seconds passed before raindrops suddenly started to fall down, and owing to the increasing sense of intimacy between them and the conviction that things simply shouldn’t get any more complicated than they already were, they both found that unexpected drizzle to be most welcome.

“Oh, how I love Venice!” he said. Letting go of Rose’s hand, he raised his arm and put a hand under his head. “I can’t believe it’s been so long since I last came to visit.”

“Ya feeling better now?” Rose asked as she closed her eyes to enjoy the feeling of the cold droplets falling on her face. “No wonder you were exhausted when we left Whitehall. I don’t think there’s a single young woman at court that you haven’t danced with tonight.”

“Tell me about it,” answered the Doctor. “That’s precisely why I tried to persuade Queen Elizabeth not to throw a party, but she just wouldn’t listen.”

“Ya wanted her to cancel the ball ‘cause ya don’t like dancing?”

“Are you kidding? Of course I like dancing! Especially at a Renaissance ball. I love Renaissance balls!”

“Then why did ya want the ball called off?”

“Because when someone holds a ball in your honour, Miss Tyler, everyone wants to dance with you, which means you’re very unlikely to ever get the chance to dance with the only person you ever intended to dance with.”

Rose felt her cheeks burning and a chilling sensation going up her spine. Once again, the thought that things had recently gotten infinitely harder came to her head. When John and Clara left back in the month of May she had assumed they wouldn’t be away for too long. Taking it for granted that she and the Doctor would stay in Elizabethan England just for a couple of days, the truth and its consequences, though shocking, would’ve been infinitely much easier to bear. Now however, when it was utterly impossible to figure out how long their impossibly long summer together had really been, or keep track of the many times the Doctor had let her know how much she meant to him, or of the many times she had had to refrain herself from doing what she most longed to do, all she knew was she was wavering. The Doctor had never acted on his feelings, that much was true, and what she was terrified of was the possibility that she might just ruin everything they had by acting on hers. She knew she had made him suffer, although the reason why she might one day just
decide to leave him she would never understand. The only thought that brought her restless mind some clarity was that thought that she would never let herself hurt that again.

Hence, she blinked her eyes open, and then, without hesitation, she changed the subject at hand.

“So, what are we gonna do tonight?” she asked, turning her head to face him matter-of-factly.

“What are we gonna do tonight?” asked the Doctor, his eyebrows shooting up in surprise. “Have you really just asked that or am I just hearing voices?”

“I’d assumed ya hear voices,” she teased him. “Nothing else can explain why ya do the things ya do.”

“Well,” answered the Doctor pensively as he looked up, “you might not be so wrong about that after all…”

“Ya don’t feel like going out there somewhere?” Rose asked as she started to bite her thumb.

“Well, you may not have noticed, with me going on about the universe for so long and all, but we’ve already gone out there somewhere tonight. As it happens, we’re in Venice, we’re having a ride in a gondola, and that straw-hatted chap over there is taking us to hear the boatmen singing.”

“Then what are we gonna do after we hear the boatmen singing?” she asked, turning around and giving him one of her most overpowering smiles.

“Oh, I dunno…,” answered the Doctor, narrowing his eyes slightly. “I thought you were too tired after the ball to do anything other than lazing around, that’s why I brought you here. I guess the question is, what would you like to do?”

“I’m up for anything. Surprise me!” she answered, propping herself up on her right elbow.

“Okay, fine… Just… Just let me think!” The Doctor got lost in his thoughts for a moment until a wide grin lit up his face. Propping himself up on his elbow as well, he made a suggestion. “Why don’t we go back to sixteenth-century London? We might just pop by The Globe! Y’see, I’ve heard there’s a new play by this bloke everyone calls William Shakespeare…”

“Boring,” Rose teased.

“Boring?” the Doctor exclaimed in feigned surprise. “Rose Tyler! How can you say boring? That’s everything but boring. He’s the greatest impostor of all times!”

“Ya can’t lie to me, Doctor!” Rose teased again in between laughs. “Ya just wanna go meet ‘im ‘cause you’re pissed he pulled your leg once and you never saw it coming, don’t ya?”

“I probably do, yeah,” he confessed. “But given that now we’re in Venice, it would be a bit silly to come back, wouldn’t it?”

“Reckoned ya were gonna say now we’re in Venice we might just jump into a canal,” Rose teased again.

The Doctor didn’t say a word at first, but when he suddenly gave her a smile she had not expected to see in the slightest she understood that her words, which she had intended to be nothing more than a silly joke, hadn’t been taken lightly.

Thus, before she knew, the Doctor was crouching down in front of her. His enthusiastic smile,
however, vanished from his lips the moment his eyes travelled the length of her legs.

“Oh, what a shame!” he suddenly exclaimed with disappointment. “It was such a fantastic idea!”

“What? What is it?” she asked as she sat up straight. “Aren’t we jumping into the canal anymore?”

“Not unless you want to go straight to the bottom. I mean, look at you! That costume of yours must weigh tons!”

“It does,” Rose answered as her eyes darted to the beautiful dark red and gold costume Queen Elizabeth had had specially made for her with the occasion of the ball, “but I reckon I might just… You know. Take it off.”

“What did you just say?” the Doctor asked, his eyes wide as they gazed into hers in astonishment.

“I mean it! Ya ‘ave any idea how many layers of clothing and underwear I’m wearing, Doctor? Trust me, I could take off lots of it and still be decent enough for eighteenth-century Venice.”

“If you really think so,” whispered the Doctor after a brief pause.

As Rose stood up with the intention of removing nearly every single one of the garments she was wearing, the Doctor remained lying down for a bit longer, not because he didn’t want to stand up as well, but because he suddenly found himself too nervous to do so. Knowing that the worst thing he could do was just stay there and watch while Rose took off her clothes, he spent the next few seconds frantically trying to come up with a very good reason to get up and walk away from that edge of the gondola immediately. Fortunately for him, the happy thought that there was in fact someone else on the other edge soon came to his mind.

“Scusi, signor gondoliere,” he said with lots of hesitation as he jumped up and strode towards the gondolier, “questa é la… Oh dear, where’s the TARDIS when I need it? Okay sir, so… Questa é la fine della… La fine della nostra passeggiata, right? Capito? At least for the time being… Oh, I really hope that made sense! I mean.. Per il momento! Questa é la fine ma della nostra passeggiata per il momento! Y’see, mia amica Rose over there ed io vogliamo nuotare sui canali, so… Do you think Lei potrebbe aspettarci un attimo da qualche parte qui intorno? Oh wow! Did I really say that? That was brilliant!”

The Doctor was so much in ecstasy regarding his Italian speaking skills that he didn’t notice the gondolier had hardly heard a single word he had said. The man’s eye had long been caught by the sight of the beautiful young woman who was unashamedly taking off her clothes at the other end of the gondola and who by that time had already managed to take off her gown, her sleeves, her partlet, her kirtle, her forepart, and had just started to take off her bumroll.

“I’m thinking she’s the one who put the spell on you, mister gondolier,” the Doctor asked waving a hand in front of the man’s face - a hand the gondolier didn’t even notice. Neither the insolent look in his eyes nor the smirk on his lips seemed to shed any light that would help the Doctor find out what was actually happening to him. Therefore, the Time Lord being one who had never really known how to let mysteries just be, he did what he had once used to do when he couldn’t solve a puzzle by himself - he asked Rose for her opinion.

“Rose?” he called, his eyes still fixed on the man. “You have any idea what might be wrong with the gondolier? He’s been numb for a while now, and he seems to be in shock.”

“Well, I think I have a pretty good idea, yeah,” he heard Rose say quite rudely right behind him. “Oi! You! Turn around!”
“What!? But Rose, I’m not even looking!” he answered turning around. “Look, I’ve been observing this man for a while now and I just can’t see w…” Lips pursed together, the Doctor never finished that sentence. The words he had intended to say next suddenly vanished from his mind together with the image of the gondolier as a new image took over - the image of Rose Tyler’s farthingale falling down to her feet.

At long last, the Doctor finally understood.

“What?!” he exclaimed turning back to the gondolier. Reaching out for the man’s straw hat, he covered his face with it entirely. Immediately afterwards he strode towards Rose, who had been observing him and trying to repress a laugh. “Rose, we need to leave right now!”

“I’m almost done ‘ere,” Rose said. “I’m gonna need your help with this thing though.”

A few seconds of silence and immobility went by before the Doctor nodded and muttered the word ‘okay’. Rose was talking about her corset which was laced at the back and which was utterly impossible for her to unlace without help. Feeling how his lungs had just started to fight for air, the Doctor slowly stepped towards her as Rose turned around. When he found himself standing behind her, his eyes spent a moment studying every detail of her soft golden hair, which had been beautifully arranged for the ball. Two long braids decorated with white pearls encircled her head, and out of the shortest one sprang a bun made of curls. Rose had been careful not to remove a single strand of hair from its place while undoing the closures in the neck ruff of her exquisite dark red and gold dress, and for such a little thing, the Doctor was extremely grateful. It meant that his trembling hands wouldn’t have to go anywhere too close to the back of her neck.

The Doctor’s long fingers worked slowly and delicately as they unfastened the lace-up. When the corset was finally unfastened, he sighed with relief. However his sense of relief was short-lived, as he suddenly found himself face to face with all the bits of her back that her smock wouldn’t cover. It wasn’t only the back of Rose’s bare neck that his eyes could feast upon now, it was also her shoulders and the trace of her spine between her shoulder blades. Should he spend much longer staring at the bare smooth back of the woman he would gladly chain himself to forever, the Doctor knew he would irrevocably end up doing the very thing he had been trying so very hard to not do for the past few months. And yet, his chances of finding a way out of it, which had never been too many, now seemed to be none at all.

As Rose looked down at their reflection in the canal, her whole body shivered. The Doctor was standing so close behind her that she could feel his breath upon her neck and her hair standing on end. Oh, stop it Rose, she thought to herself as she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Ya gotta stop this now. Say something or walk away... Ya just can’t ‘urt ‘im. Ya can’t do this to ‘im again. But no matter how much she wanted to, she just couldn’t stop it. In fact the truth was that she didn’t want to run away. She had been fighting her feelings for so long that now suddenly it felt all that was left for her to do was just surrender.

Frantically looking for answers the way he always did, the Doctor soon decided to take a leap of faith regardless of what the consequences might be. Thus, he stepped closer to Rose, took her hands in his and wrapped his arms around her waist and held her tight against his chest.

“At the count of three?” he whispered in her ear as he let his head rest on her shoulder.

“Okay,” Rose answered, caressing the soft leather of the strap in the vortex manipulator for fear of what might actually happen if she dared caress the skin of the Doctor’s own hand.

“Here we go then,” said the Doctor, feeling slightly intoxicated now that her scent had just got into his nostrils. “One, two, three!”
And so, the Doctor and Rose Tyler jumped into the canal. The water was really cold, but not cold enough to prevent any of them from noticing the warmth of the body pressed against their own.

Rose was feeling terribly confused. Only seconds before she and the Doctor had been caught in a mess of such proportions her mind had not been able to find a single way of it. If jumping into the canal had been the Doctor’s best shot at shutting what their recent physical proximity had unleashed back inside this sort of Pandora’s box they had accidentally opened, the fact that his arms were now wrapped even more tightly around her wasn’t helping in the slightest, as neither did the fact that his hearts kept beating faster against her back.

All Rose wanted to do now was get rid of his arms, turn to him, and ask him what was happening between them. What was really happening between them.

Even through her closed eyelids, Rose felt a blinding flash of light shining even if they were still submerged in the canal. Then, all at once, the water felt incredibly warmer. When their bodies finally made it to the surface, Rose began to understand. First she noticed the noise around them, thunderous like the waters of a thousand mighty rivers seething with the fury of a thousand wild horses. Then she noticed the light shining down upon her still shut eyes, and finally the rather warm sprinkle falling upon her face.

As she opened her eyes, it dawned on Rose that the Doctor must have pressed some button on the vortex manipulator at some point after they jumped off the gondola. Not only wasn’t it night anymore, they were no longer in Venice either. The evidence provided by her own eyes told her that the Doctor must have decided to take her to another planet. And yet, she knew that just couldn’t be. Many had been the times when the Doctor had told her that such thing wouldn’t be possible without TARDIS, otherwise the alien gravity would crush them even before the alien atmosphere had a chance to choke them. Still, she couldn’t possibly fathom why a thick curtain of mist was rising up from the ground towards the sky. What she had thought to be raindrops had turned out to be mist droplets on their way back down.

After a few seconds, the fog and the mist dissipated only slightly, but enough for Rose to be able to look through them. Upon doing so, she discovered a far-reaching cliff behind it. The fact that it was covered by trees made it look very much like Planet Earth. Taking a look around, not only did she realise that the impressive cliff stretched for as far as the eye could see, she also noticed that an unfathomable abyss separated the Doctor and her from it, that the waters on their side of the abyss were ruthless and unruly, and that the Doctor was now paddling towards the edge and carrying her with him.

“Doctor what on earth are you doing!?!” she shouted nearly at the top of her voice as her eyes widened in terror. “Doctor, this is a waterfall! We’re gonna fall down!”

But the Doctor hadn’t listened, and if he did, he didn’t seem to care. As he kept paddling forward Rose realised that, impossible as it might have seemed at first, the current wasn’t dragging them onwards. Despite the impossibly vast and infuriated river around them, they happened to be immersed in a small naturally formed pool of much calmer waters was inside it. When they reached the edge, Rose realised that a rocky wall contained most of its waters, preventing them from cascading downwards.

Still refusing to let go of Rose, the Doctor put one hand on the wet rock and propelled them both up on top of it.

“There,” he whispered in her ear the moment they both sat on the rock. “We’ve just had a swim inside the Devil’s Pool. Rose Tyler, welcome to Victoria Falls.”
By the time the Doctor finally let go of her, Rose didn’t even notice. The opulent display that nature itself was offering to her bewildered eyes was so sumptuous that she couldn’t look anywhere else. Countless times did her gaze travel from one side of the cliff to the other, then to the Zambezi river behind her as it flew towards the edge of the precipice, and finally downwards to see the waters of that very pool as they cascaded down towards the river below.

Rose felt exhilarated as she had never felt before, and when she suddenly turned around and her eyes accidentally met the Doctor’s, the same eyes that had just been taking great delight in the wonders of such a lavish wonder of the natural world soon found themselves taking even greater delight in the wonders within the immenseness of his brown iris. At that moment, she seemed to forget where she was or where she had come from, and even what she was headed for.

At that moment, it finally hit her. There was no going back at all.

She had been worrying about what might happen if she lowered her guard for much too long, but now she was done with that. All she knew was that right there, at the edge of her own precipice and irrevocably destined to fall, the rest of the world might just go to hell since his was the only company she wanted to keep at all.

For the first time in her life, Rose Tyler had been able to understand what it truly felt like to be on top of the world.

“Rose,” the Doctor whispered, his eyes locked with hers and his mouth dangerously moving in the direction of her mouth.

Rose obviously hadn’t heard him. The uproar of the waterfalls had prevented her from doing so. And yet, she had understood him. They way she didn’t pull back was proof enough.

“Doctor,” she whispered back. Of course he knew, she thought. He had known all the time. It was just that now she was finally ready to hold absolutely nothing back.

Soon she felt his breath caressing her face. When his mouth was just merely an inch from hers, and she didn’t pull back, the Doctor took a hand to her face. As he stroked the line of her jaw with his knuckles, Rose took a hand to his hand and started to draw circles near his wrist with her fingertips.

The next thing they both knew was a blinding flash of white light. Immediately afterwards, their bodies lost their support and fell down. When their backs hit the ground, they noticed it was still quite wet but also soft and cold. The sky had changed as well. Now it looked much darker, and the freezing air was chilling their drenched bodies to the bone. The roaring of the waterfalls was there no more. Instead, there were birds singing, and they definitely sounded like morning birds, the Doctor thought, and very familiar ones for that matter.

“What’s happened?” Rose asked, looking up at the sky as she remained lying on the ground.

“Where are we now?”

“Well,” the Doctor started, “I guess you must accidentally have lifted the flap of the vortex manipulator just enough to press the very button that would take us home.”

“What do ya mean home?”

“I mean that, if you sit up and look to your left, you’ll see Whitehall Palace right behind me.”

“Really?” Rose asked. In the blink of an eye she sat up and looked, and when she spoke again, her anxiety had turned into disappointed. “I guess that’s Whitehall, yeah, but the timing’s pretty rubbish.”
For a split-second, the Doctor didn’t quite grasp the reasons why Rose should be so upset to be back in Elizabethan England, but no sooner had he turned his face to her than the image of his hand caressing her soft skin and her lips so very close to his own came back to his mind. With a smile on his face, his hand travelled through the wet grass until it found hers, and when it did, he jumped up and sat up with easiness.

The Doctor had been determined to put an end to what they both had started at Victoria Falls until the moment he turned his head in her direction and saw what had been hiding behind her. From then on, everything became hazy and confusing. As his thoughts went down the darkest road he could ever have imagined at breakneck speed, he would have sworn he had actually heard Rose’s voice calling out for him at some point and asking whether he was okay, but by then he had been so lost in his thoughts that he wasn’t even sure whether he had answered. Maybe he had or maybe he hadn’t. In any case, now it just didn’t matter.

The moment Rose turned her head around and saw the blue box that was parked in front of the entrance to St James’s Park, she would surely understand.
The Last Rose of Summer

Chapter Notes

I'm terribly sorry it's taken so long to update this! I'm afraid I've been struggling with this chapter for months. On the other hand, these days I just can't stop writing, so I think the following updates will definitely take much less. Whether they'll be 3 or 4, I haven't been able to decide yet. Thanks once more to my dear friend and beta NoPondInTheForest for all her help and support!

Drenched to the skin and hopelessly miserable, it was not without difficulty that the Tenth Doctor stood up. As he did, he took a glimpse of the next Doctor and Clara Oswald coming out of the TARDIS. Under any other circumstances he would have been more than pleased to see his spaceship and her two current occupants return. What happened his time however was absolutely unprecedented – he felt the temptation to take Rose in his arms and run away.

So this was the end, he kept thinking to himself. Chinny and Clara had finally come back to steal Rose away from him and to remind him that it was high time for him to regenerate.

All of a sudden, everything felt like a dream. Everything around him became blurry and hazy, and soon it started to spin. He fought against this sudden bout of anxiety of course. After all he just couldn’t stay put. He had to come up with a plan really fast and sort things out straight away, and when it was all over he would wrap his protective arms around Rose and tell her he was determined he was never going to let her go again.

The Doctor closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened them he saw Rose was standing still in front of him. By now she had obviously seen not only Chinny and Clara, but also the blue box parked behind them. He had described it to her a zillion times before, but this was indeed the first time she had ever laid eyes on the TARDIS. As he kept watching her, she had started to shake. At first he didn’t make much out of it. It was early in the morning, the air was chilly and humid, and Rose’s smock was completely soaked. It didn’t occur to him that she might have been shaking for a very different reason. As a matter of fact, it never did until he eventually heard her speak.

“Back in a mo’,” her sweet but trembling voice whispered, and those few words were enough to make the Doctor wake up from his trance. The thoughts of impending doom and the budding plans to escape that followed faded away the moment he turned around and saw Rose running away as fast as she could from not only Chinny and Clara but also from himself. All of a sudden, his eyes went wide with disbelief. Disbelief met with relief when, unaware of himself as he had been, he became aware of the fact that the limbs that had momentarily felt numb were becoming alive again. He tried to follow her but his legs faltered, although they seemed to be regaining some confidence with every new attempt at taking another step. Then he tried to call out her name, but due to his terribly troubled breathing no sound ever made it to his throat. Meanwhile Rose kept running fast as could be, and soon she disappeared inside a thick bank of morning mist.

The moment Rose got out of the Tenth Doctor’s sight was the moment Clara Oswald and the Eleventh Doctor reached him. He thought he had heard Clara mumble something he couldn’t understand, next thing he knew she was also running away. Her reasons for doing so were very
different from Rose’s, that much he knew. She just wanted to get ahold of Rose herself.

Crossing his arms over his chest, the Eleventh Doctor watched his companion in silence until he could see her no more. He turned to his previous self thereon and found him staring into nothingness. To the older Time Lord, that came as an unspeakably appreciated relief. The fact that the Tenth Doctor didn’t seem to be inclined to speak would spare him the hardship of having to explain why they had returned, even if he suspected that, deep down inside, the other Doctor had already guessed much of it.

Unfortunately for the Eleventh Doctor, it was not long until the bliss of silence was broken.

“You once told me there’s always something you can do,” he heard the younger Doctor mutter, and curiously enough those had been the very last words he had wanted him to say.

“Yeah, I guess I probably did,” he answered, looking down with a smirk that indicated he was actually talking to no other but himself.

“Well, do something for goodness’ sake,” the Tenth Doctor’s voice begged. His sad brown eyes went way beyond that – they implored him.

“I’m sorry, Sandshoes,” answered the Eleventh Doctor when he finally found the strength to speak. “I’m afraid I just can’t.”

“Of course you can and you will,” said the Tenth Doctor in both denial and disbelief. “You said you break the rules all the time, Chinny. This time, to make things even easier you won’t even have to bother! Just tell me what to do and I’ll do it myself.”

“There’s nothing you or I or anyone else can do this time, Sandshoes,” the older Time Lord answered. “There are no rules that can be broken or alternative route that can be taken. No matter what we might dare to attempt, her lifetime as we know it would suffer the consequences. If she stayed, she would never meet good old Mr Fantastic. I’m sure you can imagine all the rest.”

Indeed the Tenth Doctor could imagine. To be completely honest with himself, he had briefly pictured it in his mind a million times a day every day for the past few months, and each time he had also pictured his older self coming up with some perfect plan that would eventually save the day. Having just found out that there was no such plan, he understood that this was a truth he wasn’t willing to accept.

“Don’t give me that, Chinny,” said the younger Time Lord with a stony expression on his face. “You know what? When I think of all those stories about everything you’ve been doing since I regenerated, have you ever wondered what the common ground is? ‘Cause I believe I can tell you. You keep changing the future, Chinny. You change the future all the time, so please don’t tell me that this time for some stupid reason you’ve just decided that you can’t!”

“You don’t understand, do you?” asked the Eleventh Doctor furrowing his brow. “If we changed her future our past would change just as much. We would never have met her, Sandshoes. Don’t you understand that? If keeping her today means tomorrow Rose Tyler will be wiped out not only from our lives but also from our memories never to come back again, then I’m terribly sorry Sandshoes, but I’ll do everything in my power to send her back.”

“Oh, look at you!” said the Tenth Doctor with sarcasm as he kept frowning at his past self. “The man that would laugh in the face of paradox! You seriously want me to believe now you’re terribly scared of them?”
“Don’t be ridiculous, Sandshoes. Paradoxes never scared me. It’s just that I find them bromidic and dull, and they just don’t interest me. The only reason why I always laughed at them was that I could never understand why you used to be so scared of them all the time.”

Thereupon something happened, something that took the Tenth Doctor utterly by surprise. After his future self said those words, something clicked inside his brain. Whether it had been a sudden revelation he just couldn’t decide, not yet. Maybe he had always known. Maybe he had fully understood upon meeting the next Doctor for the very first time. Truth be told, they hadn’t even been together for too long when he realised that, where he had been overcautious, the Eleventh Doctor had seemed to be reckless. His hearts and soul had often been overwhelmed with sorrow, yet the future Doctor always seemed to react to things the way an enthusiastic child would have done, and now that he had become aware of it, he had also understood why.

All his life, the Eleventh Doctor had desperately been trying to escape from what he had been, from everything this sad and lonely incarnation ever was. And yet, now that there was real evidence that something terrible might be about to happen to someone they both loved so very dearly and that they unquestionably had to do whatever it took to protect her from harm, it occurred to the Tenth Doctor that the older Time Lord had probably never been more like him in what he had already lived of his seemingly long next life.

“There’s no time to lose,” added the Eleventh Doctor as soon as he noticed that something was very different in the way the younger Time Lord was looking at him at the time.

Having just said those words, he turned around and strode in the direction of the TARDIS. The Tenth Doctor followed right behind and soon they both were going through the door and bouncing towards the console, coming to a halt the moment they found themselves standing right in front of the scanner reading all the date displayed in the screen.

“The scanner says it’s a newly-formed wormhole,” said the Eleventh Doctor in a tone that terrified his younger self, “and as you can see from these readings, it seems to have been born deep in another universe. To be precise, in the universe where Rose now lives.”

“And yet, for some mysterious reason, it’s coming to the universe that’s recently been trying to steal her back,” the Tenth Doctor took over, astonished and wide-eyed. “So it’s coming for her.”

All at once, his eyes opened even more widely when the loudest bang he had ever heard - and he had heard quite many - came from the side. He turned to the right and watched as the doors of his very own TARDIS, which had been in stasis since the moment Chinny had found him, were being shaken from behind by something that seemed to possess the roaring force of a supernova explosion.

“Not just for her I’m afraid,” his future self shouted. “Whatever’s coming through that wormhole is falling into your TARDIS.”

“So it’s also coming for me,” said the Tenth Doctor almost imperceptibly. For a moment he kept staring at his spaceship in silence, his narrowed eyes fixed on the blinding white light shining out of the cracks between the doors and the frame. Whether or not that white light might have posed a real threat to him was something that didn’t bother him in the slightest. It was the possibility that it could actually be putting Rose in danger that gave his mind the clarity it had been wanting and the clarity that was finally making him understand. No matter how badly he might want her to stay with him. Just by being there or anywhere else with him she would be in constant danger, the way she had always been.

“We must take her home, where she’ll be safe,” he finally owned up, even if in doing so his two
hearts sank inside his chest. He spent the next few seconds silently staring into nothingness, the agitation inside him written all over his face.

“I’m really sorry Sandshoes,” said the Eleventh Doctor when the ceaseless noise inside the younger TARDIS seemed to be giving them both a momentary break. “I wish there was another way, but sometimes there just isn’t. That’s why we keep losing them.”

Amelia Pond. And Rory. Those words suddenly echoed in the Tenth Doctor’s ears as he realised he had completely forgotten that his future self had also known loss, despair, and loneliness.

“After Canary Wharf,” he mumbled, “I was convinced that nothing compared or would ever compare to the pain of losing her. I was so wrong! Giving her up forever was infinitely worse.”

“Things are never that simple Sandshoes,” the Eleventh Doctor reassured him. “You just did what was best for her, and no one can blame you for doing what you did.”

“Well, you did. Don’t you remember?” said the Tenth Doctor, his soul crashing to the ground. “You blamed me once, yet now I can only be glad you remember my reasons to let her go ’cause I seem to have forgotten them all myself.”

“I’m sorry I said what I said, Sandshoes,” apologised the Eleventh Doctor. “I was being too hard on you. Ever since you regenerated I guess I’ve always been hard on you, but I’m never doing that again. You just did what you felt you had to do, and you did it just for her. You meant well.”

“Well, I keep telling myself that,” answered the Tenth Doctor, “otherwise I know I won’t be strong enough to give her up once again.”

*****

The truth was that Clara Oswald hadn’t the faintest idea what was really going on. By the time the Doctor had popped by her room for the second time that morning, she had already got up, taken off her Elizabethan nightgown and put on her red dress. Whereas on his first visit the Doctor’s mind had mostly been blown by the excitement of his recent rescue mission in the Tower in the company of Anne Boleyn, all he seemed to care about on this new occasion was their imminent trip to the Moon. In fact, Clara had barely had time to take her black leather jacket from the edge of the bed when she realised he was pushing her out of her Whitehall bedchamber and into the TARDIS. Closing the door of his beloved ship behind them, the Doctor started to pull levers and press endless buttons as he went on and on about the unparalleled sweet flavours and the unimaginable side effects of the cocktails they were about to taste.

Suddenly it had all seemed so perfect and natural to Clara that she had actually believed the time for some peace and quiet and some fun had come at long last. Still, since the day she first met the Doctor she had known for a fact that it only took a split second for his plans to be altered by completely unexpected events. Unfortunately for her, this time would be no exception. As a matter of fact, they had been inside the TARDIS for barely sixty seconds when she noticed the first signs indicating that the Doctor’s perfect plans had all at once become just failed intentions.

Clara first noticed something was wrong when the Doctor’s characteristic frolic around the console finished and his eyes fell on the scanner. He instantly became completely silent, which Clara interpreted as the first sign of trouble. Then he became really very pale, which to her was the
definite proof that something was terribly wrong. She asked what was going on, but the Doctor never even answered, probably because he hadn’t even been listening in the first place. In due time life won the battle and returned to his fleetingly petrified face. Looking down, his eyes darted to the sides as he eventually spoke.

“We have to go back,” he had muttered. “We must go back to Whitehall.”

“Doctor, what’s wrong?” she asked again.

“We must go back to Whitehall,” he repeated. Without the shadow of a doubt, to himself.

Clara knew only too well there was something the Doctor wasn’t telling her, that something of the utmost importance had definitely been left unsaid. Crossing his arms over his chest as he frowned, the Doctor took another walk around the console, although this time it was a silent one. She kept watching him as he pushed all the levers he had previously pulled and hit the one button that would cancel all the actions undertaken by all the buttons he had previously pressed. When this new walk around the console was over, she saw him fix his eyes on the scanner once again. There was something else on his mind, she just knew it, but whatever it was he just wouldn’t say.

“Hope we won’t get there too soon, nor too late,” he muttered enigmatically confirming Clara’s suspicion.

Then, instead of pushing the last of the levers, Clara clearly saw him pulling it. Immediately afterwards, an ear-splitting sound startled them both. Clara turned her head and laid eyes on the Tenth Doctor’s TARDIS, the place where that strange sound had undoubtedly come from.

“Oh well,” she heard the Doctor say behind her, “at least I’ve tried to do my best.”

As the noise went on and on, his hands dropped heavily to the brim of the console while they both waited impatiently for the TARDIS to land. When the Doctor briefly turned around to look at her, Clara locked her big brown eyes with his and searched inside them in the hope of finding the answers to all of her questions, the way she had always done. This time however it seemed that there were no answers. The Doctor’s singular enthusiastic gaze had been taken over by anger and wrath.

At long last the TARDIS landed. Then they walked out through the door and spotted the Tenth Doctor and his friend, and now she found herself running in search of Rose Tyler in the cold London early morning air.

It didn’t take Clara very long to spot Rose in spite of the scattered banks of mist surrounding them. She found her sitting on the grass not very from the entrance to Whitehall Palace, her head resting on her knees and her arms wrapped around her legs. Clara had the feeling that she had fallen down and got hurt so she immediately rushed to her.

As she got closer, she realised Rose was crying, silently but bitterly, and all at once Clara felt she had absolutely no right to be there. She stumbled to a halt, and for a while just watched Rose from the distance. As she did, it occurred to her that she didn’t even need to ask Rose why she was crying. She just knew. Partly because certain things had been ridiculously obvious even when no Captain Jack Harkness had been there to explain them, but especially because she had pictured herself in Rose’s position many times before this moment came. In her mind’s eye she had cried the same tears and felt Rose’s same pain piercing through her soul, then the very next second she had felt selfish and stupid. Wasn’t she having the time of her life after all? Wasn’t just the fact that she was now travelling with the Doctor enough reason to not give a damn about what the future might have in store? She knew it was, but still sometimes that thought would just get stuck in her
head and darken even her brightest day – the thought that one day, sooner or later, the alien she had come to love so very dearly might simply vanish from her stupid little life for good.

Her whole body shivered as Clara eventually decided to take the few decisive steps separating her from Rose. The realisation had just hit her that, were someone to ever be able to understand the nature of Rose’s pain and offer some real solace, that someone was definitely her. Upon reaching her, Clara crouched down behind her and gently put a hand on her drenched shoulder. Rose of course knew straight away whose hand was trying to comfort her, as it had been on that same shoulder before. Determined to show Clara how much she appreciated that gesture, she made a successful effort to regain some of her composure. She even managed to stop crying, if only briefly, and slowly turned around, her eyes searching for Clara’s. Making eye contact with her made tears start to fall down Rose’s face again. Her first impulse in that moment was to bury her face in her knees, but Clara never gave her the chance.

Overlooking the fact that Rose was utterly soaked through, Clara opened her arms and hugged her, letting her weep silently against her chest. Not only was Rose silently grateful that Clara was holding her in her arms, she was also grateful for her silence, for leaving unasked so many questions that ultimately weren’t really needed. Her heart and her soul were breaking, and that was too plain to see.

Not even when Rose finally felt the need to find some relief through words did Clara feel there was any need to rush the conversation in any degree.

“I know I shouldn’t be so sad,” Rose started, somewhat calmer than she had seemed a few minutes before. “I’m just going back ‘ome so ’s all there waiting to happen and soon he’ll be comin’ for me! ‘S just that… What happens to me and ‘im in the end, the way things end… ‘S just not what I want!”

Rose started to weep again, and Clara tried to soothe her by caressing the hair on top of her head. She wished there had been something else she could have done to reassure her, but she just wouldn’t tell Rose what she knew about her future even if she suspected that, whatever the Doctor might have told her, he hadn’t told her the truth. All she could do was state the obvious.

Rose knew that in the end she would be losing the Doctor, and it was that loss that she was dreading more than anything else in the world. Unfortunately for Clara Oswald, when it came to the uneasiness and fear that the loss of someone you love makes you feel, she could relate to that too.

“I lost my mom when I was about your age,” she told her. “Your world stops when something like that happens, then one day you realise that the real world has kept moving and that you must keep moving as well. Things will always find a way to become the opposite of what you hoped they’d be, Rose, but you just can’t let that bring you down. You need to find your own way. You have to cherish what you had and be grateful that one fine day those people came your way.”

“Even if you made them hurt?” Rose asked in between sobs. Clara was greatly surprised by such an unexpected question. In fact, the more she tried to remember the look on the Doctors’ faces every time they had looked at Rose from the moment the Tenth Doctor saved her from the scaffold, the clearer it became to her there had never been any trace of hurt in them. “Does ‘e still think of me?” Rose went on. “I know that ‘e really shouldn’t and that it’s really selfish of me to ask if he does, but… Does ‘e?”

“I’m sure he does,” Clara answered.

“So you don’t know then, do ya?” Rose pressed on.
“Well, he tends to keep to himself, the Doctor,” said Clara. “I know he’s had lots of friends, but he never speaks about them.”

“Ya mean lots of friends or lots of girlfriends?” a puzzled Rose asked.

“I mean lots of girl friends” Clara answered, separating the two words to make her meaning clear. She narrowed her eyes lightly and looked down as soon as she realised that she completely ignored what the real answer to that question was.

“He’s had lots of boy friends too,” a very familiar voice said not far from them, “though I like to think I’ve always been the sexiest.”

When Rose and Clara looked around they saw Captain Jack Harkness making a beeline for them. Further away behind him they spotted Edward, Queen Elizabeth and Anne Boleyn. Rose noticed they were all wearing the same outfits they had been wearing for the ball the Doctor and her had attended before they teleported to eighteenth century Venice, which meant they had got back to Elizabethan London early in the morning the very next day.

“You’re up early Captain,” Clara said as she released Rose from her arms.

“I never went to bed, more like, Miss Oswald. It’s great to see you again!” said Jack. “After that terrific party last night Eddie told us all about his new play. To cut a long story short, Annie, Lizzy and I got really excited about it, and what it all boils down to is that on the opening night I’ll be playing Rosalind.”

“Rosalind?” the two girls asked in some confusion.

“You need to brush up your de Vere, my dears,” Jack told them. “You’ve ever heard of As You Like It? It’s about this girl Rosalind. Someone’s put a price on her head,” he added, winking at Rose, “so she runs away with her cousin Celia. Much to Eddie’s regret, the name of Clara was ruled out immediately. Audiences are very likely to associate it to the Duke of Clarence so you’d never give that name to a character they’re supposed to love. Anyway, it’s a comedy, so in the end they all find love and everyone’s happy. I’m afraid that’s not what happens in real life though, is it?”

Jack had heard it all of course. As his gaze locked with Rose’s, he slowly stepped towards her, knelt down and smiled softly at her. He tugged a few wet strands of blonde hair behind her ear as he cleared his throat to speak again. There was just so much he wanted to say to her.

“Look at you, Rosie,” he said. “So young but so strong, so passionate and so brave, oh Rose… The things you’ve done! You don’t know but I do, and I also do know that he’ll never stop loving you and that no matter how hard he might try, he will never ever forget you.”

Captain Jack’s little confession had been the very thing that Rose had been longing to hear for months. She raised a hand to wipe her tears off her face, but she didn’t say a word. She didn’t dare break the spell her soul had just been put under at all.

“You know I thought you fancied me at first? Now it just sounds ridiculous! From the day he went and changed his hair, things have never been the same between us again,” he joked, shaking his head as he spoke. “The thing is that I was there not long after you first met, and even if it was early days I saw what was going on - what was really going on with you two. Now that I’m over a hundred years old I’m positive I’ll never see anything like that again.”

An almost imperceptible smile made its way to Rose’s lips. Jack smiled tenderly at her when he
noticed, but he said nothing. As it happened, he spent the next few minutes in silence trying to choose very carefully the words he was going to say next. He wanted to tell Rose that he had also been there after the Doctor had lost her and that he never was the same again. However he was prevented from doing so by a sudden gust of wind followed by a whooshing sound that made them all turn their heads.

In a matter of seconds the TARDIS materialised in front of them. Jack, Rose and Clara watched as the door opened and the Tenth Doctor emerged from his spaceship. His desperate eyes were looking for Rose, who stood up the moment she saw him. She tried to run to him, but the drenched shift she was wearing was tangled between her knees, making it difficult for her to even walk. It was the Doctor who ran to her instead and held her tight in his soaked arms. They both knew what was coming and that it would be coming soon, and yet it was impossible not to still feel overwhelmed with joy just by something as simple as being in each other’s arms.

Clara just couldn’t stop looking at them. Now that Rose wasn’t there to see her, she let herself shed a few tears as well. She was trying to hold back the ones that would soon follow when her attention was drawn to the TARDIS again. She hadn’t even noticed but the other Doctor had also stepped outside the door, which he was now leaning against. She could tell he had been looking at her long before she laid eyes on him. When he gave her a half smile, Clara somehow had the feeling that there was something very important that he was trying to say to her, and the reason why he just wasn’t doing it probably was that, even if he was a Time Lord, this definitely wasn’t the time or the place.

Upon noticing the TARDIS materialising not far away from them, Edward, Anne and Queen Elizabeth rushed towards their time travelling friends. Much to their regret, the scene they found upon reaching them made all of their welcoming words, even Edward’s, vanish like specks of dust in a haze. They inferred the only reason why the arrival of the lady Clara and the other Doctor would ever have made the lady Rose cry, and something broke inside each of them when they understood that the precious time together enjoyed by their two very dear friends was coming to an end.

Rose was still clinging to the Doctor’s neck, her face buried in his lapels when she heard the newcomers’ footsteps approaching them. She pulled back with some reluctance and the Doctor released her from his arms quite reluctantly as well. She brushed her tears off her face once more, then took a few steps towards her sixteenth-century friends. Crossing her arms against her drenched and terribly cold chest, she uttered the words they had feared that she might actually hear her say.

“Edward, Anne, Your Majesty,” she mumbled, holding back some new tears, “I reckon this is goodbye then.”
Big big thanks to my dear beta NoPondInTheForest for always being there and thank you guys for all the follows and favourites! Now I can safely say there'll be three more chapters and an epilogue. Hope you won't hate this one too much...

Powell Estate, London, 1st January 2005

The TARDIS landed in the heart of the Powell Estate in the wee hours of the New Year’s morning. When the door of the spaceship opened gently, the Eleventh Doctor and Clara stepped out. Rose followed shortly, although her footsteps sounded infinitely less decisive than theirs. Upon looking up she saw it was snowing much more heavily than it had been when she and her mum had said goodbye for the night at midnight, just merely seconds before she had met the Doctor for the very first time and thought that he was just some chap who had had too much to drink. For anyone else on the planet only a few hours would have passed by. To her however it all seemed to have happened so terribly long ago that, had someone been determined to make her believe she had never walked home with her mom and that it had all been just some kind of stupid dream, it wouldn’t have taken them much time or effort to succeed.

Dragging his feet along rather than properly walking, the Tenth Doctor was the last of the party of time travellers to walk through the doors of the TARDIS. Drinking in the once so very familiar and now deeply missed sight of the Powell Estate, he remembered standing there not only the night when he thought he had said his last goodbye to Rose while he had been hiding in a dark corner so that she couldn’t see his face. He also remembered the night when they had eventually said hello after his latest regeneration, their encounter with the Sycorax, and that shameful incident involving Harriet Jones. And yet, right here and now, those moments seemed to belong somewhere so horribly back in time that he, the mighty Time Lord, would have happily let himself be persuaded otherwise if Chinny had tried to convince him they had been lived by some other of their incarnations. Vivid as his memories were, not even the snow that was still falling heavily over their heads seemed to be solid enough to bind those two moments closer to the present of his sorry pinstriped self. Did it matter after all? ‘Cause he really had the feeling that it just didn’t. What really mattered to him was that he was about to lose a young woman that he adored once again, and he gaped at the realisation that this might as well be the last time he would ever set foot on the Powell Estate for good.

“Okay, so I’ve come ‘ome then,” Rose said softly, her eyes darting around as she tried to come to terms with the truth herself. “ Couldn’t be any more different from Whitehall, could it?”

“I never really felt comfortable in Whitehall Palace to be honest,” said Clara, her eyes examining the buildings that surrounded her. “I wouldn’t mind living here, though. It’s a really nice place!”

“I’ll give ya my number then,” Rose joked, though sadly. “Call me in a few years, and if I’m still sticking around I’ll let ya know if something’s for rent.”

“Damn right I will,” Clara said smiling softly at her.

Knowing that this was goodbye, the two young women kept staring at each other in silence for a
short while before they crashed into each other’s arms.

“Ya’ll look after him, won’t ya?” Rose asked, making her voice as imperceptible as she possibly could.

“Of course I will,” Clara assured her.

“Thanks,” Rose mumbled, biting her lip hard in an attempt to hold back the tears welling in her eyes. “Ya take care of yourself too.”

“I will,” Clara muttered. “Everything’s going to be fine, Rose. I know it will.”

Rose gave Clara a small smile as she pulled back, her eyes darting towards John. She found him looking very tenderly at her, a really sweet smile drawn on his lips as his hand reached out to take hers.

“You have an awesome life, Rose Tyler,” he said, then took her hand to his lips, leant forward, and gently planted a soft kiss on her knuckles.

“Ya too, John,” she replied. “Thanks for everything you’ve done.”

“No need to thank me. I’d gladly do it all again at the drop of a hat if I had to,” he murmured.

The moment John said those words, Rose felt a pang in her stomach that made her extremely desolate, and the reason why she had felt such twinge was that she had just realised she didn’t really know anything about John. Except for the fact that he was now travelling with the Doctor, that the Doctor liked to call him Chinny, and that it was pretty obvious that there was something going on between him and Clara, she knew nothing about him, nothing at all. And it hadn’t even been him who had told her any of those things personally. She had once asked the Doctor to tell her more about him, but as he would do at times with a great many of her questions, the Doctor had artfully avoided giving any answers. Not that it mattered right now anyway. She was just sad that, during that precious time that she had shared with the Doctor which had completely changed the way she saw her life, she had never really had a chance to get to know John Smith, and now she knew she would never have one.

“We’ll wait inside the TARDIS,” John said to the Doctor as he let go of Rose’s hand.

The Eleventh Doctor and Clara walked back inside the spaceship, leaving Rose and the Tenth Doctor alone outside. Crossing her arms over her chest, Rose was in silence for a while, during which time she seemed to be determined to keep her head down. The moment she had been dreading for months had finally come, so she decided she’d rather study the footprints her trainers were leaving on the snow than look up and let her eyes search for the Doctor’s. She knew that, as soon as she did, her resolve would inevitably bend and break.

For as long as she kept looking down, the Doctor kept studying every single detail about her. He sauntered around her with the intention of taking it all in and committing it all to his all-powerful memory. He knew he would forget it all against his will soon enough, but then, when the moment came for his Doctorish breath to leave this body he was still living in, he would be able to close his eyes and picture her on his mind, just as he was seeing her now, and her image would relieve the pain of dying and make regeneration a little bit less excruciating. Thus, he started by examining the way her scarf fell nearly the length of her legs, then the shades of pink and blue her clothing was painting her shape in. After that, he revelled in her impossibly long blonde hair, in her smooth youthful skin, and in the lips he had been longing to kiss since the day they first met… Oh, she was beautiful! As beautiful as the night he had secretly been saying goodbye from that corner right
behind her.

That was how he would always remember her, young, strong and beautiful, and once again he absolutely had no clue how he would ever survive without her.

His thoughts were soon interrupted by an apparently ceaseless series of ear-splitting bangs coming from inside his TARDIS, which the other Doctor and Clara had hidden inside the wardrobe so as not to startle Rose, but clearly to no avail. The deafening sounds reverberated not only inside Chinny’s console room, but also in and beyond the Powell Estate. As a consequence, all around them stray dogs barked and stray cats meowed, birds chirped, alarms went off, and the Doctor in sandshoes realised things could not be put off any longer.

Tearing apart inside, the Tenth Doctor reached his hand out, shaking his fingers as an invitation for Rose to hold it in hers. He had done that once before, but it had had a completely different meaning back then. He watched as Rose’s eyes travelled the distance from her footprints to his hand and as she resolved to take it after a moment’s hesitation. Tearing apart outside now, his free hand also searched for hers and took it in silence before she raised her head and locked eyes with him.

“I’ll see you in,” he said softly, “just to make sure you’re really safe.”

“What if I didn’t go in?” she asked in a half whisper. “What if just stayed?”

“Then we would never meet,” answered the Doctor, crestfallen. “And if we never met then we’d never… You know. Meet again.”

“So it’s already been done, right?” she said, not letting go of the Doctor’s hand as she raised hers to her cheek in order to wipe some new tears. “We wouldn’t be together now if it hadn’t, would we?”

“I’m sorry Rose,” said the Doctor. “Believe me, if something could be done, nothing would stop me… I’d just do it!”

“I know,” she mumbled, taking a deep breath in an attempt to scare her own tears away. “‘S just that I thought I’d be ready when this moment came… Blimey, I was so wrong!”

“Everything’ll be alright,” he muttered, squeezing her hands. “Just make sure not to change jobs any time soon ’cause I’ll be coming for you in a couple of months or so.”

Rose made an effort beyond words and smiled. As she pressed her lips together to prevent herself from crying, she suddenly plucked up the courage to ask the Doctor one last question, the one question she really had been wanting to ask for the past few months. The only reason why she hadn’t done so before was the conviction that, whatever the Doctor might answer, it would make her feel even more miserable than she already felt. Still, since there was no way for her to know whether her stupidly infatuated future self would care enough to ever ask after leaving him, she decided that, however much it might hurt, she just had to do it herself.

“Are you happy, Doctor?” she whispered. “I mean now in the future, when I’m not with you... Are you really happy?”

Upon hearing Rose’s sweet voice asking such an eye-opening question, the Doctor felt the warmth of her words burning inside him. After their last goodbye on Bad Wolf Bay, he had convinced himself that she could never have been left at a better place. The universe that had stolen her away from him had also reunited her and her mum with the father she had never known except only briefly when she had already been travelling with him. As if that hadn’t been wondrous enough, in no time at all she would find that she could share everything that universe had to offer with a
human version of himself, one not only human enough as to be her lifetime lover, but also vulnerable enough as to always keep in mind that he should always watch over her.

For some reason he couldn’t quite understand, the thought had never crossed his mind that whatever might have become of this fully alien version of him after he and Donna left Bad Wolf Bay should ever have upset her. And yet, this version of Rose was begging to know what had become of him because she was mistakenly carrying the burden of abandonment on her shoulders. Not having become aware of that possibility until this very moment, he felt deeply sorry and terribly ashamed of himself.

“I guess I try to be,” he answered. Looking beyond Rose, he caught a glimpse of an emotional Eleventh Doctor and his deeply moved friend Clara Oswald watching from inside the TARDIS. “But I know you are, Rose, that’s what keeps me going. And I’d never want it to be any other way, you understand?”

Even under these hideous circumstances, the Tenth Doctor had once again been able to perform his alien magic upon Rose Tyler. On this occasion, by saying the words that would be least painful for her to hear, by squeezing her hands in his, and by giving her such a reassuring smile that, had she been Samson, she would happily have let Doctor Delilah cut off every single strand of her fortifying hair.

“So what happens now?” she asked now that her tears seemed to be giving her a rare break.

“I have to lock away the memories stored in your brain from the moment you met that Zygon,” he explained. “Next time you wake up, you’ll have forgotten all about the Tower or Queen Elizabeth, or the fact that you were ever there. Needless to say of course you’ll have forgotten about us as well.”

He had meant ‘me’ instead of ‘us’, but he knew she already knew that.

“And will I ever remember any of it again?” she asked with her heart in her mouth.

“It’s highly unlikely I’m afraid,” muttered the Doctor.

Rose nodded softly as she bit her lip and squeezed her eyes shut. When she opened them again she saw a tear running down the Doctor’s face, and that vision crushed her with sorrow. The Doctor didn’t want to say goodbye any more than she did. Given that their inability to take it any longer was becoming more obvious by the minute, Rose decided to rush things over, not so much to end her own suffering as to ease the Doctor’s pain.

“So how ya gonna do it then?” she asked.

“There are different ways it can be done,” he answered, “and all of them are very simple. I could put my fingers on your temples and it’d be done in the blink of an eye. Or maybe this time I could just… Just this once, I mean, I guess maybe I could just…”

Rose waited for the Doctor to finish that line, but he never did.

“You could just what?” she asked nervously.

The Doctor kept staring at Rose in silence. His eyes widened when he saw her close the short distance separating her body from his, which she resolved to do because she knew that he knew she had guessed the words that had been left unsaid. Now that they were standing dangerously close to each other no words were spoken, but no words were needed either. The only thing that needed saying was written in the way they were looking at each other.
The Doctor and the Rose Tyler that had met in the England of Queen Elizabeth I would never have another chance to let themselves get carried away by what they felt so strongly for each other.

That was how, losing control over himself, the Doctor threw caution to the wind. In a split second he let go of Rose’s hands, wrapped his arms around her waist and leant forward to let his mouth crash down upon hers.

Had the Eleventh Doctor and Clara been peering from inside the TARDIS, they might have thought the younger Time Lord’s move to be not only unexpected but also completely unforeseen. Rose, however, would have disagreed completely. She and the Doctor had been carefully trying to avoid this very thing from happening for too long, but the heat of the events that had led them both longing for more first on that Venetian gondola and later at Victoria Falls were still running through their veins. Thus, in spite of its urgency, her mouth had been perfectly ready to welcome the Doctor’s and dance with it to the end of their world when it eventually came searching for hers. Thereby, locking her arms around his neck, she abandoned herself to the caress of his silky lips and the honeyed strokes of his tongue.

When the need for air to breath made their mouths break apart ever so unwillingly, their heads went gently down and their foreheads touched. Their eyes remained unopened for a brief while as their nostrils sucked in not only the air they needed so badly but also the scent of each other’s skin, whose warmth had been enough not only to make them forget it was still snowing massively around them, but also to put them under a spell none of them wanted to break free from, or at least not just yet.

“Please tell me it doesn’t ‘ave to be memory loss at first kiss,” Rose muttered, gasping for air.

“It could,” answered the Doctor in between shallow breaths, “but I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Good, that’s good,” she whispered, her impatient lips instantly landing on his exquisite and slightly swollen ones.

They drank and drank from each other, unashamedly and unreservedly, each like a lonely nomad whose path had just crossed with a cool and sparkling oasis in the middle of the desert after many long days of dryness. And yet, the more they drank, the less their thirst seemed to quench.

When in need to pull apart again, Rose buried her head in the Doctor’s chest. She let her hands rest on his shoulders as he drew her even closer to him. It felt so nice to be together like this, their bodies pressed against each other, so warm and so comforting. Rose didn’t dare move, worried that if she did the magic would suddenly end. Still, she knew that it would have to soon, so before the Doctor decided it was time to put her mind at ease and her recent memories to rest, she said something she simply could not leave unsaid.

“I’m sorry I left ya Doctor,” she muttered.

“Oh Rose,” he mumbled guiltily, planting a soft kiss on the top of her head, “you really needn’t be sorry about that.”

“Oh I do, Doctor, I do!” she promptly replied as she looked up to take in his dear face. “If only I could, I’d split myself in two and give stupid future me a smack! I can’t understand why I left ya behind, Doctor, and in all this time we’ve spent together I ‘avent been able to forgive myself for doing that, but still… Doctor I need ya to know… ‘Ere and now, this me, she would never ‘ave done that ‘cause… She loves you.” Pulling slightly away, Rose looked up and searched for the Doctor’s eyes, hoping and praying that he would realise the truthfulness of her words in them.

“Doctor, I love you!”
The Doctor didn’t say a word at first. He stayed put and silent while he drank her in once again, then he slowly leant his head forward. His lips brushing hers, Rose could feel his warm breath caressing her soul as he eventually spoke.

“Not as much as I love you, Rose Tyler,” he whispered into her mouth.

His mouth crashed into hers again, and this time their kiss felt infinitely greedier and hungrier, their lips and tongues and teeth desperately trying to make the thrill of that moment last. With the Doctor’s words still echoing in her ears, Rose soon realised that her senses were leaving her. At first she thought that the passion consuming them in this new kiss was to blame and that she was just losing herself over him, but it didn’t take her long to understand what was really and finally happening. And yet, all the while, she didn’t fight it or offer any kind of resistance. She knew it would be in vain. All she did was stay there in Doctor’s arms, kissing and being kissed back until her muscles went limp, her limbs floppy, and her consciousness slowly faded away.

Still, before her memories were forever padlocked and everything around her started to go dark, she made a promised, not only to herself but also to the man that she was leaving behind.

‘I will remember you, Doctor.’

________________________________________

Bad Wolf Bay, in some parallel universe, about five years later

“Not as much as I love you, Rose Tyler.”

The blue-suited stranger who otherwise looked exactly like the Doctor pulled back after he whispered those words into Rose’s ear. His eyes were fixed on her though, as he was obviously waiting to see how she would react to his confession. They stared at each other in silence but just for a brief moment, which was as much time as Rose needed to replay those words in her head and to decide – why not? – that she would certainly believe them with all her heart. Then, out of the blue, she grabbed the lapels of his blue suit jacket and pulled him down as her mouth crashed against his, hungrier and thirstier than it had ever been back on the days when she used to live in a different universe and had from time to time found herself in the kind of situation of which kissing some bloke had been the natural outcome. This wasn’t some bloke though. This was the Doctor. Well, this had to be the Doctor.

Or did he?

Then, all of a sudden, it happened. First she felt electric shocks going through her brain, and out of the blue a strange set of images projected themselves inside her head like flashes taking over her brain. To begin with she saw some kind of alien thing, all red and covered in suckers, menacingly close to her, then she saw a dark room which was practically empty except for a really old-fashioned four-poster bed. Then there was this woman, a young woman just like her, then some guys dressed up as medieval or Renaissance guards and even one dressed as a priest. Who were those guys anyway? After that there was a crowd and a scaffold, on top of which there was someone who very much looked like an executioner and whose terrifying sword strangely seemed to be waiting for her… Then everything went black and then… Then there was… The Doctor! Oh yeah! Of course the Doctor would save her from the scaffold! Then there was this young man in a bow tie, then that young girl again, and there was also Captain Jack Harkness! Also next to him was this guy in Renaissance costume, but why were there so many people in fancy dress? Unless they weren’t in fancy dress at all, unless… Oh, hang on a minute! Could that be Queen Elizabeth I? ‘Cause she certainly looked like her!
Those faces and a few others kept flashing through her mind at breakneck speed, and as the kiss she was engaged in deepened and she wrapped her arms around this new Doctor’s neck they soon started to be accompanied by voices. The first she heard was her own screaming the words let me go while beating the locked door inside that scary dark empty room.

The rest came in rapid succession.

'I’ll get you out of here and then I’ll take you home to your mom. I’m giving you my word!'

'I’d eat that if I were ya, young lass, ’cause tomorrow’s the day ya meet Monsieur L’Épéiste!'

'Someone tell me what’s goin’ on ‘ere, okay?!

'Sandshoes! Stop that execution, for god’s sake!'

'I’ve got you! Oh, how I’ve missed you! Look, Rose! It’s me!'

'Aliens exist, Rose. The Doctor himself... He’s an alien.'

'Consider yourself to be one of our most dearly loved friends at the English court.'

'We’re not good friends. We’re so much more than that, Rose Tyler.'

'I happened to introduce you. Nice chap, by the way, and really very good-looking! Seemed a bit wild to me at first to be honest, but I’m sure you’ve managed to tame him.'

'Not as much as I love you, Rose Tyler.'

'I will remember you, Doctor.'

The voices in her head rose up like birds in the sky, each flapping their wings and flying high to eventually alight on the nest where it belonged. The faces having been given voices, a thunderstorm broke loose inside Rose when, with each of her quickened heartbeats, the names of long-gone people and places started to present themselves.

Thump thump - the Tower of London.

Thump thump - John and Clara.

Thump thump - Queen Elizabeth I.

Thump thump - Edward de Vere.

Thump thump - Whitehall Palace.

Thump thump - Anne Boleyn!

And it was still far from over. The Doctor’s face would stay in her mind as the names of many other places she had completely forgotten about started to reveal themselves. The Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the lost city of Atlantis, the land of Alfheimr, the Library of Alexandria, the Amazonian Rainforest, Mount Olympus, the Porcelain Tower of Nanjing, the Great Pyramid of Giza, the Ancient City of Petra, The Colossus of Rhodes, the Northern Lights, Machu Picchu, Venice, and many, may others.

One last name, Victoria Falls, sent shivers to her spine, and the moment it came to her a tidal wave of lost memories flooded over her. How an alien creature that the Doctor had called a Zygon had
kidnapped her and taken her to sixteenth-century London under the orders of Queen Elizabeth I; how she had been a prisoner in the infamous Tower of London and how a friend of the Doctor’s, a young girl called Clara Oswald, had been her fellow prisoner there; how the Doctor himself had rescued her from the scaffold and traded her life for Anne Boleyn’s; how she had been an honoured guest at the Elizabethan court and stayed in Whitehall Palace for days on end; how the Doctor had stayed with her and taken her to other places scattered across time on Planet Earth; how she had been madly in love with him and he had been madly in love with her; how they had eventually had to say goodbye while the guilt of knowing that she would eventually leave him bit at her heart and soul.

And then it hit her. It literally hit her! She had not left him and ran away with someone else. Actually, it had been the Doctor who was leaving her with that someone, with some partly human replacement of himself! Their blissful days and nights in and out of Whitehall Palace had gone by and she had refrained herself from acting on her feelings because she truly believed she had caused him a great deal of pain, but now she knew she hadn’t! Now she remembered and she just had to tell him! Or maybe… Maybe that was still in the future for him? It had to be or he wouldn’t have mentioned she had left him for another man… Oh but anyway, who cared? Her heart was leaping inside her like dolphins leapt in the sea… She had remembered him! She had promised herself she would and she had, and she just had to tell him!

Unfortunately for her, the moment when she made that decision was also the moment when she heard the TARDIS whooshing. She looked around right away and her blood ran cold inside her veins as she gasped. Oh, this just couldn’t be happening! She couldn’t let the Doctor go without sharing with him everything she had just seen and the truth she had just come to understand! She quickly pulled away from the other Doctor and rushed forward, but she had to come to a halt almost instantly. There would be no chance to break into the TARDIS after all. As it happened, it had just proven to be too late. The spaceship she had loved and still loved so dearly was already engaged in the process of dematerialisation, leaving her dispirited and broken-hearted, and making her feel like she wanted to die right away.

For a moment Rose did nothing but stand and stare. Her head was spinning fast, not because the kiss that she and the other Doctor had got enthralled in hadn’t been intoxicating, but mostly because of all those locked memories that had finally been unleashed and were running wild inside her head. Also, because she just couldn’t believe that, once again, the Doctor had left her behind. Then, out of nowhere, with the TARDIS whooshing sound still ringing in her ears, she felt an unexpected hand take and squeeze hers. Turning her head, her eyes met those of the other Doctor, who was staring at her knowingly and reassuringly, and the thought suddenly crossed her mind that maybe the Doctor - the real Doctor – had had a very good reason to do what he had just done, to leave her trapped again in this universe that she hated so much with his doppelganger. It suddenly occurred to her that, even if this was still in his future, maybe something had happened during the time they had been apart and now he just had known what would happen next. Maybe the other Doctor had also seen what she had seen! After all, it had actually been him who had opened that locked door and given her back all those forgotten memories when they kissed, maybe… Maybe this had been meant to be after all!

“I think I’d like to get a really long coat, just like that one,” said the Doctor unexpectedly, in an attempt to take some heat out if the situation. “Wanna help me with that?”

Rose however didn’t seem to be listening in the slightest. Her eyes were fixed on the empty space that the Doctor in the TARDIS had left on that ghastly beach once again, and as this new Doctor looked ahead, he found it quite obvious that her mind was somewhere else.

After a few seconds, Rose took a deep breath, turned to him, and looking at him intently, asked a
very simple yet for her absolutely crucial question.

“What do you know about Anne Boleyn and Queen Elizabeth I?”

“I’m sorry?” asked the Doctor, visibly surprised.

“How much do you know about Queen Elizabeth and her mother Anne Boleyn?” she insisted, although she felt terrified just by seeing the puzzled look on his face.

“Well, I met Queen Elizabeth I once, and I may be wrong but I certainly got the impression she didn’t really fancy me... As for Anne Boleyn, I met her once too, a long time ago, but I don’t know anything of special significance about her. What I know is what everybody else knows. Should I know any more than that?”

“Okay, forget about them!” Rose added impatiently, determined to ask another question to give him a second chance. “What about Shakespeare then? How much do you know about him?”

“What?” he asked as his eyes narrowed.

“You heard me, Doctor. What do you know about William Shakespeare?”

“Rose, what kind of question is that?” asked a very confused Doctor with a frown.

“Rose, love, ya feeling alright?” asked her mother, who had just been standing there next to them all the while.

“Just answer me, Doctor!” she implored, tears starting to well behind her eyes.

The Doctor was really astonished and perplexed. He knew Rose well of course, which meant that he was sure there had to be an extremely good reason for her to be asking such strange questions. Still, he couldn’t guess what it was, nor could he possibly know how much was actually at stake.

“Well, I met him once, soon after I lost you,” he explained, shoving his hands in his jacket pockets as he looked down. “I was a bit disappointed at first and so was Martha, but he grew on us both later. Y’see, he was being haunted by these witches - carrionites, actually, ’cause surprise surprise, they turned out to be aliens. I can give you all the details if you want me to, Rose, but I just can’t see how that is relevant right now.”

“That’s exactly the problem,” Rose answered, her hopes plummeting to the cold wet sand.

“I don’t know why you’re doing this right not, Rose, I really don’t,” he said with as much calm and concentration as he could muster for the time being, “but I’d love to find out! In fact, it might actually help a lot if you just explained what...”

“Forget it,” she cut off, “just… Just forget it!”

“But Rose…,” he insisted, taking a step towards her.

“I said forget it, Doctor!” she snapped.

“Rose, what’s got into ya? He’s only trying to help,” added Jackie, who was as confused as the Doctor.

But Rose wasn’t aware of her mother or the other Doctor being there with her, not anymore. And just like that, she turned around and ran away from them both.
Last Goodbyes

Chapter Notes

I'm terribly sorry it's been ages since I last posted. Life and work have been getting in the way all this time, but finishing this story that always remained in my to-do list, and now there are only two chapters left I would never forgive myself if I didn't. I dedicate this chapter my dear and encouraging friend NoPondInTheForest - I still owe you a really long email!

No beta, so all mistakes are mine.

Powell Estate, London, 1st January 2005, not long after sunrise

The city of London seemed to be fast asleep after all the hustle and bustle of the New Year celebrations. Still, other than the distinctive and soothing hum of the console, there had been no other sounds to be heard inside the TARDIS for quite a while. Such unusual silence had two very different and unconnected reasons. The obvious one was that neither the early birds nor the night owls of the Powell Estate had suddenly found themselves unsettled by any more noises coming from inside the younger spaceship. The less obvious one was that, from the moment they had peered through the door and accidentally witnessed as a slow-paced Tenth Doctor carried an unconscious Rose Tyler up the steps that led to her mother’s flat, the Eleventh Doctor and Clara Oswald happened to be succeeding in avoiding not only talking to but also looking at each other. They appeared to be managing to keep their distance by pretending to be terribly busy behind opposite sides of the time rotor, each with matters they had successfully misled the other into thinking they’d be totally incapable of helping them with.

Clara had been spending most of her supposedly terribly busy time leaning over the console, her elbow seated upon the cold metal edge as her chin rested on top of her hand. For the most part she kept looking up at the computer screen, although she would occasionally risk taking a peep at the Doctor. Deep down inside, however, she would secretly be hoping he wouldn’t be looking back at her every time her eyes turned to him. Now that she actually knew how the story of the Tenth Doctor and Rose Tyler had always be bound to end, she inevitably understood what her own future was going to be like. Much to her surprise she found that nothing had ever broken her heart as much as discovering that, since the day he left Gallifrey for good and set out to travel the stars, the Doctor had always been destined to end up alone. No matter how long she might be keeping him company - eventually there would come a day when he would desperately reach out for her but she would have vanished from his radar, as Rose Tyler and Captain Jack Harkness and all of his countless other companions had done before her. Time was a Time Lord’s blessing, he had told her once, but in the case of the Doctor - now she knew - it was also his greatest curse. That he was no ordinary Time Lord was something she had been able to work out by herself, but until that very moment she had never truly understood the full extent of what being the Doctor actually meant. She finally did now. It meant always moving on. It meant forever having to start all over again, not daring look back because the pain of dwelling in the memory of the ones he had loved and lost would ultimately drive him insane.

Hiding behind the other side of the time rotor, the Doctor had also been trying to avoid looking up at Clara for what felt like an eternity by now. With his eyes fixed on the nearest set of buttons, he
had long been keeping the pretence that he was musing over the way the lights on the console had kept flashing. Even if he would risk looking up at her occasionally out of the corner of his eye, he could tell that Clara was shunning him as well. He knew why of course. Although he had never breathed a word about his many former companions, it must finally have dawned on her that, one way or another, all of their journeys with him had inevitably come to an end. The fact that she was unmistakably eluding him was assuredly not contributing to give him any peace of mind in the slightest, but it was certainly buying him some time to try to come to terms with the fact that, whether he wanted it or not, he would inexorably have to answer her questions when they eventually came.

Those questions wouldn’t take too long to start pouring - that much was easy to guess. There was one question he was particularly dreading to hear coming out of her mouth. Unfortunately for him, that very question had suddenly settled itself inside his own treacherous brain, making him clench his fists and teeth every time he played it in his head.

So one day you’ll lose me too - won’t you, Doctor?

The sudden reminder that sooner or later there would come a day when, because of some dark twist of fate, he would find himself having to let go of his dearest Clara Oswald made a shiver run through the Doctor’s spine. Closing his eyes, his head dropped slightly. For Clara’s sake, he suddenly wished that the events of the past few days had simply never happened - being handed a second letter from Queen Elizabeth I, seeking help from Sandshoes for his new quest, travelling to Elizabethan England and everything it had given rise to… With every hurried look he took at her he could sense the storm that her feelings were building up inside her, and the conviction that it was causing her unspeakable suffering was making it difficult for him to even breath.

For his previous self and Rose’s sake, however, the events of the past few days were something that he, the mighty Time Lord, would never ever dare change. As for his own sake and the sake of his unhealed wounds, this might just give him a taste of something he had rarely known but something he had always desperately held on to every time it had come his way - some peace of mind.

Luckily for the Eleventh Doctor’s and Clara Oswald’s sanities, the sound of the younger Time Lord’s footsteps as he stepped inside the TARDIS put an end to the train of their hectic thoughts. All they had to do was turn around and set their eyes on the newcomer to understand that getting inside the spaceship had probably been the result of force of habit rather than a decision he had consciously made.

Indeed, the Tenth Doctor looked and acted as if he was in a trance, his senses completely overruled by his feelings. His eyes appeared to be staring around the console room, yet in his mind’s eye all he could see was the desperate gaze of the girl he had just parted with. The sensation of warmth left by Rose’s arms after being wrapped around his neck for so long just wouldn’t leave him. He could even feel her famished mouth responding to his equally voracious one the moment it crashed against hers, and if he closed his eyes, however briefly, there was no detail he wouldn’t be able relive, however small. The twinkle in her eyes as she kept her pupils fixed on his. Every single snowflake that had come to rest on her long golden hair. She had known it was finally time to put their borrowed time behind them, and yet, as was to be expected of the warrior she was soon to become, she refused to let go of it. She struggled and struggled until their kiss deepened so much as to render her unconscious, which eventually enabled the Doctor to tear down the barriers erected by her reluctance to leave him.

The Doctor’s heart had been in his mouth as he had carried her up to her flat, safely put her into bed and sat by her side, just as he had done right after her delicate neck had been rescued from the
swordsman’s blade. Leaving was not the choice he would have made had he had any choice in the matter. It was upon realizing he could have possibly spent centuries sitting there drinking her in that he came to terms with the fact there was nothing else for him to do. Slowly and unwillingly, he knelt down by her bed, caressed her cheek with the back of his hand and planted a long soft kiss on her forehead. A tear had crossed his cheek as his sad brown eyes had stared at Rose Tyler for the very last time. Then he stood up, turned around and left.

As far as the Eleventh Doctor and Clara Oswald could tell, the Tenth Doctor hadn’t even noticed them. As luck would have it, an unexpected roar coming from his temporarily unstable TARDIS brought him back to his disheartening reality. When he finally spotted them, the way his eyes were blazing with the vibrancy of the many tears that for some reason he still had not shed made Clara gasp. A need to comfort him immediately took hold of her. She wanted to run to him, take his hand and tell him everything was going to be fine. What she did instead was squeeze another hand - the one of the Timelord that had finally come out of his hiding place behind the time rotor and walked in her direction to squeeze hers.

Such were the power and the strength of those two hands every time they intertwined that not even the next roar would dare unbind them.

With the following roar, the look of confusion vanished from the Tenth Doctor’s face. He suddenly realised he was back inside the TARDIS and that he had gone there to face his own demise. This one incarnation of him was dying. Not that he was ready to go this time at all, he thought to himself as he took his hands off his pockets and stared at his spaceship, but at least he could find some consolation in the fact that Chinny had proved himself to be a more than worthy Doctor to pass the baton to. As for the friends that were now gone, he had ensured no harm would ever come to Donna, Martha and Mickey appeared to be doing wonderfully now they were together, and Jack had seemed more than willing to stay and keep an eye on the Zygons that had been causing so much trouble in sixteenth-century London as long as Edward de Vere was there with him.

As for Rose, or at least the young version of Rose he had recently spent the happiest days of his tenth incarnation with, he was certain that the joys of the time they had shared had more than outweighed its sorrows.

The subsequent roar made the Tenth Doctor inhale deeply as he clenched his fists. “Okay,” he muttered, his eyes fixed on his TARDIS. “Whatever you are, you’ve come for me, haven’t you? Well, here I am. Take it easy mate. You found me. I’m going in. I’m regenerating. I’ll play my part but you’ve got to promise me you’ll leave everyone else alone when I’m gone.”

Knowing for real that this meant goodbye, Clara let go of the Eleventh Doctor’s hand and closed the distance between her and the Tenth Doctor, who turned to face her as she put her hand on his arm.

“Oh, hello again, Clara,” he said looking softly into her eyes as a hint of a smile appeared on his face. “High time I left, isn’t it?”

“Doctor, I …,” she whispered as a tear slid down the corner of her eye. “I wish we could’ve done something to make her stay.”

The Doctor went quiet for a few seconds before he gave her an answer.

“It’s okay, Clara,” he said, slowly putting his hand on the hand she had put on his arm. “Wherever she may be right now, I’m sure she’ll be doing fine. The Rose Tyler I know could never be doing otherwise.”
That hadn’t been entirely true of course. The Doctor was far from sure that the version of Rose he had abandoned on Bad Wolf Bay would be doing fine. All he could do was hope she would. Clever as she was, there had to be a way for her to understand that everything he had done, he had done only for her. However, had he told Clara so and said the word hope out loud, he would’ve been admitting that uncomfortable truth to himself. Now that the end was near, the only thing that prevented him from finding peace was the impossibility of ever knowing whether Rose had finally got to understand.

“I wish you could stay too,” added Clara.

“But I am staying, Clara. Of course I am,” he replied as he loosened his grip on her hand to point at the Eleventh Doctor. “Look at me! I’m over there. Right behind you.”

“I know,” said Clara, “it’s just that being with the two of you at the same time for so long... And you’re both so different! It’s been a while since it started to feel like you’re two different people.”

“But we’re not,” he said, shaking his head slightly. “We may look differently, speak differently, and I bet more often than not we may also have acted quite differently. However... I know I’m going to regret saying this, but I guess somehow he’s been brewing inside me all this time. I believe he is who he is because I am who I am. Somehow he is what I’ve been secretly looking forward to becoming all this time ‘cause, different as we may seem, his cause will always be my cause. Each and every single one of the bodies that came before us and each and every single one of the bodies that’ll come after us - we all live for the sole purpose of protecting those who need protecting. Of helping wherever help is needed. That’s what we’ll always do and that’s who we’ll always be.”

“Sorry to interrupt you there, Sandshoes” said the Eleventh Doctor as he walked towards them, “but if we take into account your meta-crisis regeneration, I’m not sure there’ll be many other bodies coming after mine.”

“Doctor, what are you talking about?” asked Clara, turning to him in alarm.

“Oh yes there’ll be,” said the Tenth Doctor. “You’re the breaker of rules, remember? I’m sure you’ll find a way. Besides, you’ve got Clara. And on those rare occasions when the universe gives us a Rose Tyler or a Clara Oswald... That’s all the motivation we need.”

None of the three time travellers would have believed it if they had been told that the next roar would actually manage to startle them. As soon as it was over, the Tenth Doctor took a step forward, walking past Clara and the Eleventh Doctor, and spoke with determination.

“Okay, that’s my cue,” he said, furrowing his brow. “I won’t let that thing make a nuisance of itself again.”

Turning to his future self and Clara, he remembered his frustrated latest attempt at regenerating. Somehow, he thought, it had been much easier to go through it all back then, when he had been all alone inside his spaceship. He had had nothing else to lose back then. Now that Chinny and his girlfriend were there, saying goodbye felt infinitely harder.

“I bet you still don’t want to go,” said the Eleventh Doctor from behind him.

“You know me well,” he answered.

“Well,” his future self went on, “at least this time you won’t have to go alone.”

The Tenth Doctor smiled softly when he heard those words - among other things, because he certainly was unspeakably grateful there would be someone he would actually be able to say
“Thanks,” he answered. “It’ll be nice to spice things up a bit.”

“Tell me about it,” his future self answered. “The way I remember it, it was kind of bleak and gloomy.”

“Well, it can’t have been that bad, can it? You came out of it,” he said, causing the Eleventh Doctor to chuckle.

Finally, the Tenth Doctor started to walk ahead, while the Eleventh Doctor and Clara followed right behind him. Upon reaching the TARDIS, its rightful owner took his key from his pocket, then turned around nervously to say one last goodbye to his friends. He wrapped his arms around Clara and held her in a long embrace.

“You take care of him, Clara,” he said, his chin resting on top of her head. “Us Time Lords… We can be reckless and unpredictable, especially if we’ve spent too much time alone. We need someone to talk some sense into us every now and then.”

“Of course I’ll look after him, Doctor,” she said as another tear crossed her cheek. “I promise you that.”

The roars that had seemed to give them a brief break suddenly came back, incessantly and much louder than before if that was even possible. Each of them thought they would be gone after a few seconds, but much to their surprise the opposite happened. As it seemed, this time they were there to stay. It didn’t take the Doctors or Clara very long to notice there was a certain rhythmic pattern in them, as if they were the beat of a powerful and inexplicable swan song.

The Tenth Doctor released Clara and turned to his older self, his younger hand reaching for his. No words came out of their mouths as they shook hands, but there were certain last words that the departing Doctor had been planning to say to the other Doctor for quite a while, and as he didn’t want Clara to hear, he opted for sending the message telepathically.

Cherish your time with her, Chinny. Cherish every second of your time with her. You and I know you can never know how long it’s going to last.

After the Tenth Doctor’s message resonated in his brain, the Eleventh Doctor’s head went down, his chin nearly touching his chest. Since he had met Clara he had not wanted to even think about it, but of course he knew how right Sandshoes was. It happened while Amy and Rory were travelling with him, it had also happened while Donna was travelling with him… And would he ever be able to forget how terribly unexpectedly it happened while Rose was travelling with him? One moment they had been fighting by his side, shining with the light of the brightest of galaxies, and the next they had been irrevocably gone.

Letting go of the Eleventh Doctor’s hand, the Tenth Doctor slowly turned to the door. He held up the key, inserted it in the lock, and finally turned it in. As he pushed the door open, the chaotic scene he found inside his spaceship made him think that something in the logical cycle of the life and expansion of the universe must have gone terribly wrong.

“What the hell,” he mumbled.

The console room was still in the dark, the way it had been since Clara and Chinny had come to find him, but now it was also housing a most spectacular phenomenon. The most ancient
mechanisms of the universe itself seemed to be at work inside the TARDIS. A massive cloud of air, gas and dust was whirling around the time rotor. The Doctor had witnessed the birth of a galaxy on more than one occasion, and although it didn’t make any sense at all, he knew this looked pretty much like it. It was as if a powerful tornado had taken over his console room.

The Eleventh Doctor and Clara gazed at the spinning cloud in amazement from outside the door. The electric charge inside it was now making it flash with light, the way lightning flashed during a thunderstorm. The roars themselves seemed to have turned into thunder, and yet they had managed to keep their musical quality.

Determined to find out what was really going on, the Tenth Doctor stepped inside his spaceship. No sooner had the soles of his shoes come into contact with the grating than the familiar orangey-yellow light which had disappeared from the console room came back. An almost imperceptible smile formed on the corner of his mouth, but it soon disappeared. As a matter of fact, the sudden stabbing pain he felt in the middle of his chest made him realise that it had been inevitable for said light not to bring something else with it - the agony of the effects that the radiation he had voluntarily exposed himself to were inflicting on his now once again dying body.

He put a hand on his chest and squeezed his eyes, silently waiting for the twinge to subside. He watched as the cloud that had been twirling around suddenly shrank, then started to spin even faster and eventually lifted up from the ground. Its ascent stopped the moment it touched the ceiling, but the spinning, the lightning and the thunder didn’t. If anything they intensified, making the air in the console room feel colder.

To a mind like the Doctor’s, there could only be one explanation. This wasn’t the way a paradox manifested itself in the slightest. This had to be something else, he was almost completely sure. Something had to be coming. There had to be something travelling through the wormhole the TARDIS had detected, and it was coming for him. Which meant it was paramount to set his pain aside, rush to the console, and manage to get the TARDIS away from there so that no harm would come to Clara or the next Doctor. He would deal with that mysterious creature alone, and if he happened to regenerate while he was dealing with it, then so be it. Nothing like the strength of a newly born Doctor - as opposed to the vulnerability of a dying one - to guarantee success in dealing with a new menace. Also, knowing Chinny as much as he already did, he was positive he was going to love it.

Now that the decision was already made the Tenth Doctor staggered to the time rotor, but his aching body betrayed him and he fell flat on his knees. He could hear the word ‘ouch!’ coming out of his mouth before the thunder in the console room became so loud that it was utterly impossible to hear anything else. He looked up at the now blinding light coming from the dizzying cloud whose whirling was like nothing the Doctor had ever seen before. All of a sudden a thunderbolt came down from it, touching the grating right before the spot where he was kneeling. Its intense brightness and the nearness of the place where it landed made him close his eyes in order not to risk becoming blind. When he opened them, he saw a human-shaped figure kneeling down right before his eyes. Whether it was actually human was difficult to determine yet. Black and white clothing covered every bit of skin. The head wasn’t covered though, except for the arms that were protecting it. Soon those arms started to return to their natural position, allowing the Doctor to see the long blond hair that had been hiding underneath. All at once, when the human being that had come out of the thunderbolt finally revealed itself to the dying Time Lord, the pain his whole body was aching with seemed to numb for a second before it returned, furious as the Doctor could never have imagined it to feel. With his eyes wide open and his lungs fighting for air even harder, tears welled in his eyes for a brief instant before they started to fall down his face with the violence of a thousand rivers cascading down Victoria Falls themselves.
Ignoring the fact that regeneration would soon be coming to get him, Rose Tyler threw herself into the Doctor’s arms. Physically weakened not only by the poor state of his dying body but also by the revival of all the emotions that seemed to be determined to stay with him till his end, the Doctor fell on his back, taking Rose with him now that his arms were tightly wrapped around her waist.

“Rose,” he sobbed, his face covered by her golden hair, “oh Rose.”

Rose had never even intended to say anything. Lifting her head from the crook of his shoulder, she looked into his eyes from behind the veil of tears clouding her own before her mouth crashed against the mouth it had been longing for so long. It hadn’t been that long since the Doctor had last kissed her though, but still he kissed her back as if he had never kissed her before at all.

Clara and the Eleventh Doctor kept staring at them from outside the door. Taken aback by Rose’s unexpected arrival, it took the older Time Lord a while to realise that the rotating gas cloud that had shaped the portal she had come through was still there. The Doctor became a bit anxious, especially because the thunder and the lightning hadn’t vanished either. There could only be one reason to explain it, and that reason was that Rose had not only used it to get in. The vacuum that had formed itself in the very heart of the whirl above her was determined to swallow her back.

That obviously posed another terrifying question. Having managed to come back again, was she aware of the fact that she wasn’t coming to stay? Because somehow he suspected that she wasn’t.

When the Doctor’s and Rose’s mouths eventually drifted apart, the thought rushed through the Time Lord’s brain that their yearning for each other was inevitably going to accelerate his regeneration. The absence of air in his lungs had already been worrying before Rose came. Now after their long and longed-for kiss it seemed that what little air his lungs might still have had in store had definitely run out. He had probably risked suffocating. Even so, just this once, he wouldn’t have stopped it at all.

“Rose,” he gasped, his elbow resting on the grating as he pushed himself up. His other arm, wrapped around her waist, still bound her to him. “How on earth have you managed to come back again?”

She loved the way he smiled softly as he asked her that.

“How could ya ever doubt it?” she asked, sitting down on the grating right between his legs as she wrapped her own around his waist. “I had to come back, Doctor. Not just ’cause I wanna be with ya, but also ’cause I need ya to tell me the truth.”

“The truth about what?” he asked.

“How about the other you,” she answered.

“The other me?” he asked, puzzled, right before another sudden pang reminded him that this body was still in the process of breaking down. “Has he…? Oh dear, what has he done?”

“Oh, I… I couldn’t… I wouldn’t… I’m afraid I don’t know,” she mumbled as her body started to shake slightly.

“What d’you mean you don’t know?” he asked, narrowing his eyes.

Rose looked down, uneasy. She had known all along that this question would be asked, but try though she might, she hadn’t been able to come up with an answer that wouldn’t make her feel deeply ashamed of herself.
“I know ya meant well when ya left me with ‘im, Doctor, but...,” she added before self-consciousness made her silent.

“How long has it been since you last saw him, Rose?”

“A couple of years, maybe,” she answered sheepishly.

There was a brief silence before any of them spoke again.

“And I take it that hasn’t happened because of some decision he’s made himself, has it?” the Doctor finally asked her.

“But I don’t want ‘im, Doctor... He’s not you,” she said as tears started to fall from her eyes. “All this time I’ve been wondering where ya might’ve been, whether ya might’ve found new friends or whether you’d just be roaming the universe on your own. Not knowing about this you, the real you… That’s been killing me! I just can’t pretend ya never even happened and spend my days with someone else when all I want is to know that you’re okay!”

“But I’m always okay, Rose,” the Doctor answer, wrapping another arm around her and burying his face in the crook of her neck. “Eventually, I get by. I always do.”

“And what do ya do till ya manage?” she asked, sobbing.

“Well, most of all, I think of you,” answered the Doctor, pulling back in order to be able to look her in the eye. “I picture the wonderful life that’s still there waiting for you, and I feel so glad that to be the one that made it possible. The chance to wander another universe in a baby TARDIS and in the company of someone who loves you more than you’ll ever know. You want to know how I know that? ‘Cause he’s me. Did you hear that? I’ll say it again,” he added, lifting her chin with his hand. “He happens to be me, Rose Tyler. The only difference between us is he can have you. And the reason why he can have you is he’s vulnerable enough to understand that you’re as vulnerable as he is and never forget it. That’s why he’ll take much better care of you than I ever did. I’ve lost you so many times, Rose. I very much doubt he ever will.”

“But ya didn’t tell me the truth ‘bout ‘im,” she cried. “Ya let me believe I’d leave ya for another, but I didn’t. I got...”

“Wh... What?” the Doctor mumbled.

“I got lost and I came back for ya,” Rose went on. “It was you who decided to banish me to that other universe and sent ‘im with me.”

“Hang on a minute,” the Doctor mumbled as his eyes opened wide, “Did you just say I let you believe...? Oh Rose... Do you actually remember?”

“Remember what exactly? My room in the Tower of London? The scaffold and the swordsman? Anne Boleyn and Elizabeth I? Don’t be daft - of course I do,” she answered with a half smile that the Doctor adored, as it succeeded in dispelling the sadness that had taken hold of her.

“But how can you remember?” he asked.

“When ya left us on that beach,” she said. “It all came so suddenly. I kissed ‘im and all those memories just came rushing in. Then I let go of ‘im and turned around ‘cause I wanted to tell ya, but ya were gone.”

A bleak look returned to her face, and the Doctor regretted asking that question more than he had
ever regretted anything he might have said in his extraordinarily long life.

“Oh Rose, can’t you see?” he said as the words he had been looking for all along had finally presented themselves. “How can you still think he and I are different people when he actually brought you back those impossible memories of me?”

“Then why didn’t ya tell me the truth?” she asked again, succeeding in her attempt to hold back her tears. She had travelled universes again just because she needed an answer to that question, and if she wanted the Doctor to give it, he had to be completely sure that she would know how to handle the truth. “If you’re really the same person, then why would ya let me believe I’d left ya for another?”

“Because the truth would be a hard pill to swallow. Rose, you’d been through a lot when we found you in the Tower, and we still had to take you back home after that marvelous time we had. I didn’t want those days to end and neither did you, which meant you’d have to go through a lot more afterwards. How could I possibly have told you about the future? To make you dread the days that were to come? That would’ve been pointless and unfair,” he replied as a tear crossed his cheek.

“And what about what you would have to go through, Doctor?” she asked, cupping his cheek with one hand as she put the other on his chest. “We were there for each other. We could’ve comforted each other.”

“Oh, you did comfort me, Rose,” he said, cupping her cheek with his hand in return.

“You know what I mean, Doctor,” she whispered. “Ya ‘ad me from the moment I opened my eyes and saw ya sitting down on that stupid chair next to my bed.”

“I know,” answered the Doctor. “And I knew you knew I was crazy for you too.”

“Things could’ve been so different,” she mumbled.

“Oh Rose, things were amazing as they were. Were I to have the chance, I wouldn’t change a second of it. You needed to get to know me, and things just ran their course. Believe me, much as I wanted to, don’t you think it would’ve been unsettling to tell you any more than I did?”

Guilt could be a terrible thing, and the innocent young Rose who had been kidnapped by Queen Elizabeth I had been terribly haunted by it thinking she had irreparably broken the heart of the only man she had ever loved.

“So that was it,” she finally said, not so much to the Doctor as to herself. “All along ya were just... Trying to protect me?”

“How could you ever doubt it?” asked the Doctor, visibly moved by her words. “I failed miserably at Canary Wharf, Rose. I’ve just been trying to make up for that ever since.”

Rose burst into tears again and buried her face in his chest. The Doctor wrapped her arms around her once again, one hand resting on her back while the other caressed her golden hair.

“This me is dying, Rose,” he whispered, holding back his tears as another pang left him momentarily breathless. “Not that I’m complaining about it at all. I’ve already died in front of you twice and believe when I tell you there’s no better way to die, but I want you to be safe. You must go back now. No matter how long it’s been - he’ll be waiting for you. He’d spend his whole life waiting for you if he had to. I know him well.”

“I still would’ve stayed with you forever, Doctor,” she whispered in his ear.
“I know,” he replied, “but I’m afraid the thing that brought you here won’t leave until it’s swallowed you back again.”

Of course, thought the Eleventh Doctor. Sandshoes had also noticed. Good for him to have done.

“I know,” she replied. “This is it I guess. I mean, when we finally get to say goodbye.”

“This is not goodbye,” said the Doctor. “For the Doctor and Rose Tyler, the stuff of legend, it will never be goodbye.”

“I love you Doctor,” she whispered as her fingers caressed his chin.

“Not as much as I’ve always loved you, Rose Tyler,” he whispered back as his mouth came down looking for hers.

They kissed again - recklessly, irrationally, hopelessly. And all the while, Clara Oswald and the Eleventh Doctor inevitably kept their eyes fixed on them.

This time their kiss ended just because the Tenth Doctor’s life was also about to end. Her eyes full of tears, Rose looked tenderly into his as she helped him get back on his feet. His hands were resting on her elbows when he suddenly felt a really familiar and scorching sensation in his arms. He raised one hand, looked at it, and there it was - the regeneration energy was coming out of it.

“Rose, step back!” he said in alarm. “Chinny, take her away from here!”

“What?” Clara muttered.

“I love you, Doctor,” said Rose as she held on to him for a few more seconds.

“I love you too, Rose Tyler,” he said, visibly emotional. “Now go and be as happy as you possibly can. And once again, do it for me.”

“I will, Doctor, I promise,” she answered.

Her hand let go of his waist but it refused to say goodbye without grabbing his - the one that was still free from regeneration energy. They spent a few more seconds looking at each other in absolute silence. Everything that had been left to say, they were telling each other with their eyes.

Once again, it was the Doctor who had to end it.

“Go now Rose, please,” he said as tears started to uncontrollably fall from his eyes.

Rose wouldn’t move or let go of his hand though, so the Doctor asked for help again.

“Chinny!” he shouted in panic as he felt the moment for his whole body to let out all of its regeneration energy drawing closer. “Chinny you gotta take her away from here! Now!”

“Doctor, you’re not going to…,” said Clara, but before she could say any other word she saw the Eleventh Doctor rushing through the door.

The moment the older Timelord stepped into the Tenth Doctor’s TARDIS, the cloudy portal that had been touching the ceiling started to descend, clearly inviting Rose in, but Rose hadn’t even noticed it. Her eyes were still fixed on the eyes of the man she loved, and he kept looking at hers in return. Eventually, when the regeneration energy contained inside the Tenth Doctor’s body started to flow out of it with the ferocity of a supernova explosion, Rose passed out. Luckily for her, the Eleventh Doctor had been standing right beside her so he took her in his arms before she hit the
He knew what he had to do next, although he didn’t dare right now think of its consequences.

The Eleventh Doctor turned to face the portal, which by this time was turning around at a much slower pace than it had previously been. He took a deep breath and fixed his eyes on it trying to decide which would be the best moment to jump in. Then, all of a sudden, he heard a very familiar and dear voice calling for him.

“All right!” Clara cried desperately.

He turned to his left, and there she was. Clara. His Clara.

“All right...” she called again, but said nothing else. A sudden and stupid idea had come to her head and she had feared it for a split second but immediately discarded it. There had to be another way. Now that she could see the sadness on his face when he looked back at her, the truth of what was going to happen became crystal clear.

The Doctor was leaving never to return.

“All right, don’t leave me,” she begged him as a tear ran down her face. “Don’t leave me please.”

For a brief moment, the Doctor looked as if there actually was something that he wanted to say to her, but even if it had been so, he just never had a chance. The doors of the Tenth Doctor’s TARDIS suddenly closed, and a few seconds later, it dematerialised.

Clara just couldn’t believe it, but she was never going to see the Doctor again.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!