The Long and Winding Road

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Summary

The very last person that Jack Harkness expected to see was standing on the Valiant.

Notes

As always, nothing you recognize belongs to me. Quotes have been taken from various episodes and I will note which is which in the beginning of each chapter.
Prologue: Things Lost

Captain Jack Harkness stared at the wall. She was gone. Well and truly gone. Dead. It was so inadequate: her name, one of thousands, little black letters on gray newspaper. 'Rose Marion Tyler, deceased.' He thought he would be violent, that he would yell and scream and throw things. He hadn't. He thought that he'd have been there, been able to see her one last time, to kiss her properly instead of a quick press of the lips. He wasn't and couldn't. He thought the Doctor would save her, would always save her. He didn't.

He was angry, mostly at Torchwood, a little at the Doctor. For not saving Rose. For leaving him behind. For being so damn irresistible. For challenging him to be something other than a conman, a survivor. He was angry at Rose, for travelling with a man—alien—she knew was dangerous, for reminding him that he could be noble and good, for dying. He watched her grow up after his Vortex Manipulator dumped him off a hundred years early. He never went too close—timelines and all that, but he watched her. Watched her mum try to raise a little girl on her own, watched her change from a child into a bright young woman, watched her break Jimmy Stone's nose after he gave her a black eye.

Mostly, he was tired. When he lost people, people he cared about, the years seemed to weigh on him as eternity stretched out in front of his eyes. Did the Doctor feel like this all the time? How did he stand it? Now, more than ever, Jack needed to find him.

Even his team agreed. At least, Gwen did, and it was Gwen who found him in his office staring at the newspaper. Gwen, who reminded him so much of Rose. She was a little older, maybe a little more suspicious, but the compassion, the empathy and desire to comfort were all there, the clever mind and brilliant comprehension of people—what makes them tick, and why, were all there. She knew when she saw him that something had happened. He wished he had told her about Rose and the Doctor, but some things were too precious to voice.

So now he was here, sitting across from the little girl who was not a little girl, staring at the wall, remembering.

"What is your question?" Her voice brought him back to the present.

"For the usual fee?" Always good to make sure.

She nodded. "If the cards will tell me."

He asked.

She laid the brightly painted Tarot cards on the table and studied them. For long moments neither spoke, and then finally she shook her head. "They will not answer." Bitterness welled up within him, but he pushed it down. It had been a long shot. He stood, ready to go.

"Will you hear what they will say?"

"Does it matter?" It isn't what he's looking for, and he doesn't have time for vague pronouncements of doom. He gets enough of those in his dreams.

She studied his face. "It is always important."

He sighed, and gestured for her to go ahead.
"Something is coming." He sniffed, and she shot him a glare. He nodded apologetically and she continued. "Someone you have been looking for, waiting for." She held up the Magician. "He rides the ebbs and flows of time itself, but something else is waiting, something lost." She looked at Jack seriously. "The wolf is at the door."

He thanked her and left. The last bit—about lost things and wolves, disturbed him for a time, but it was forgotten in the rush of joy and grim satisfaction that suffused him. The Doctor was coming back! Finally, he would get his answers.

Years later he would remember her words, stranded on the Valiant. The Wolf is at the door.
Martha Jones shivered as she slid into the passenger seat of Tom Milligan's van. A doctor. She was travelling with a doctor again. Life, it seemed, favored gallows humor. She glanced at her companion. He was handsome, in a rugged sort of way. She wondered what he was like before the Master and the Toclafane. There was a set to his eyes and his jaw that spoke of hardship, of anger put to purpose and determination, of patience and the potential of violence.

"I was studying to be a doctor," she said finally, to break the silence.

He looked at her. "Really?" She nodded. "Why'd you stop?"

She grinned. "Met a man. Went off to see the universe." Her smile died. "Ended up here."

"You're a hero," he said quietly. "You give people hope."

"You're a hero," she countered. "You save lives."

"I'm just a man, one ordinary man, doing what he can, and in the scheme of things, in the grand plan —if there even is one—I'm nothing."

"I've got this friend," she said thoughtfully. "and he always says 'there's no such thing as an ordinary human.'" It would be nice, she thought, to be a proper doctor, to be able to throw yourself into saving just a person. The Doctor loved people, collectively and individually, but all too-often he was caught up in the tide of the greater cause. Individuals fell by the wayside as he wrought changes that shaped the infrastructure. He touched thousands of lives. She would settle for touching one, for saving one. She realized, then, that she envied Doctor Tom Milligan. Everywhere she walked she saw destruction. The Doctor brought hope twinned with death. He thundered through the world like a hurricane. They were silent for the rest of the trip. Tom drove, and Martha leaned against the window, catching a few hours of precious sleep. There was never enough time.

He took her to see the rockets. The shipyard was massive, but not the biggest she'd seen. Russia had that honor, dubious as it was. She told him about Russia and the purpose of the rockets—war with the universe. He asked her if there was anything else he should know. She was feeling a bit whimsical, and if all went to plan he wouldn't remember anyway, so she told him about Shakespeare, about time travel and seeing the size of it all. To his credit he accepted what she said. Martha wondered if he was humoring because he thought she was mad, or if the general madness of their situation had stripped away his incredulity. She didn't think she had it in her to disbelieve anything, not after what she'd seen. Japan, god, Japan. All of the islands, burning. Millions of people dying, screaming. The solid wood of the dingy beneath her. The air—smoke and death and the smell of the sea.

She froze as a high-pitched voice challenged Tom. A Toclafane had arrived. She heard him speaking
behind her, talking about his medical position. She couldn't risk looking back, couldn't risk moving at all. The TARDIS key would only protect her as long as she was unremarkable. If she did anything to call attention to herself the Toclofane would be able to see her. It wasn't buying Tom's story. The sound of metal sliding against metal cut through the air. She closed her eyes, waiting for the screams. They never came. Instead a fizzling roar burst from behind her and something metal hit the ground. Martha whirled around. Tom was staring at the Toclofane lying on the ground, its blades still extended and smoking slightly. Martha's attention was fixed on the figure behind it. A woman stood with a strange looking gun still aimed at the ball of metal on the ground. Her eyes and hair were brown. Martha couldn't tell how long it was because, like her own, it was pulled into a tight bun. She wore tight gray pants made from some kind of sturdy material and a matching jacket. A backpack was slung over her shoulders and she wore sturdy black boots.

She holstered the odd weapon and touched her ear. "Control, this is the Bad Wolf. The preacher is safe, I repeat, the preacher is safe."

"Who are you?" Martha demanded. Tom was silent, but his hand strayed close to his own weapon. The woman shook her head. "Can't tell you. I would, I really would, but this timeline is all ready fragile and one wrong push could dissolve it around us. Right now the only thing that's holding it together is the paradox machine, and even a TARDIS has limits." Her lips twisted into something that might have been a smile. "And besides, you wouldn't know it anyway." She pondered something for a moment, and then seemed to come to a decision. "But you can call me the Bad Wolf."

"The Bad Wolf, like in Little Red Riding hood?" Apparently despite what she thought earlier, it was still possible for the universe to surprise Martha Jones.

The Bad Wolf shrugged. "Or like in the Three Little Pigs. The concept's basically the same."

Martha rolled her eyes. "You're worse than the Doctor, you are. Why should we trust you?"

"Don't bother to thank me for saving your life," the woman shot back. "And speaking of your friend, when you see him you'd best tell him that Brigadier Sir Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart wants to talk to him." Martha and Tom looked at each other blankly, and then back at the Bad Wolf. The woman sighed.

"Honestly, I don't know what they're telling you Resistance people. The Brigadier is the head of UNIT—United Nations Intelligence Task Force. Ring any bells?"

"I know what UNIT is!" Martha snapped.

"Good!" The Bad Wolf ignored her tone and appeared genuinely pleased. "I'm working with them. For the past year, Martha Jones, UNIT has been making sure that you get where you need to be. More specifically, I have."

"I've never seen you before in my life," Martha protested.

The Bad Wolf raised an eyebrow. "You're not the only one who can hide in plain site." She bent and retrieved the Toclofane, which had stopped smoking. She rapped on the metal lightly, and when nothing happened, she unzipped her backpack and stuffed the sphere inside. "Now, I think we'd best go see Professor Dougherty," she remarked quietly, "before any other Toclofane coming looking for their friend."
"You talked about timelines," Martha told the Bad Wolf as they Tom drove the van to an empty warehouse—their shelter until it was safe to meet the professor. "How d'you know about that?"

The Bad Wolf blinked at her. "Didn't I mention? I travel in time."

"You travel in time." Tom was skeptical.

She waved a hand as if he was being exceptionally dull. "Time, space, all of that. I can't see timelines, not without help, like a Time Lord, but I've got a gadget that can."

"Time Lord?" Tom again.

"Aliens. The Doctor is a Time Lord," Martha supplied.

"So is the Master." The Bad Wolf's voice was bleak.

"He's insane." Martha was adamant. Putting the Master and the Doctor together in the same group was wrong.

"Not contesting that," the Bad Wolf assured her. "He's a few screws short of a birdhouse all right, but he's still a Time Lord. That's how he knew to build a paradox machine. Have either of you ever seen a temporal paradox in action?" Martha shook her head. Tom looked at her like she had grown an extra eye in the middle of her forehead. She shuddered. "You don't want to; take it from someone who has."

"You've seen a paradox." It was Martha's turn to be skeptical.

"I caused a paradox." The Bad Wolf's voice was very quiet. "And without the rest of the Time Lords, there's no one to fix it, if it happens. If the TARDIS can't handle the ramifications of the Master's meddling and the Reapers appear they'll devour everyone on earth—maybe everything in the universe."

"The world hasn't ended yet, so obviously your paradox got fixed," Martha pointed out. "What did you do?

A muscle in the Bad Wolf's jaw ticked. "A man died. He was supposed to be dead anyway, but I saved him. The only way to undo the paradox was to allow history to happen as it did. And he died." There was nothing any of them could say to that.

Professor Dougherty's eyes became almost impossibly wide as she regarded the dead Toclofane that the Bad Wolf produced from her backpack.

"How did you do this?" she breathed.

Martha and Tom turned to the Bad Wolf. The woman shrugged. "A lightening strike in south Africa brought one down. A local branch of UNIT managed to get the readings. They cobbled together this." She held out the strange-looking gun. "It generates a current of roughly 510 megajoules—enough to fry a Toclofane."

"If we had more of those weapons," Tom began, but Martha cut him off.

"We'd get more people killed. Remember, he's still got the Archangel Network up there. Fifteen satellites sending out a telepathic signal of fear, keeping people from resisting." She shook her head. "We stick to the plan. Now, let's see what they are."
They watched with interest as Dougherty examined the sphere. The Toclofane were the stuff of nightmares. They were nearly impervious to harm and took sadistic delight in killing people in the most painful way possible. Martha shuddered as she remembered Russia—the Toclofane caught the woman helping her escape. She screamed for twenty minutes before she died. Martha had been close enough to feel hot drops of blood splatter on her cheek. If she hadn't had the TARDIS key—but dwelling on it did no one any good.

Professor Dougherty gave a little cry of satisfaction as she managed to break the magnetic lock and opened the sphere. They leaned forward to look at the thing inside.

It was a face. A face pierced by wires. Blue, pupil-less eyes snapped open.

"Martha! Martha Jones!" the thing cried.

"It knows you!" Dougherty gasped.

"What are you!" Martha demanded, pale.

"You helped us to fly," the thing continued.

"What?" Tom was glaring at it. Only the Bad Wolf was calm, gazing at the sphere with an expression of disgust and pity.

"The skies are made of diamonds."

Martha stepped back from the Toclofane. It was true, oh god it was true. She thought of the little boy, of Cree, his eyes bright as he talked about Utopia. She thought of Padrag and Beltan Shafecane and the thousands of people that she and Jack and the Doctor sent away on that rocket. All of them, flying to Utopia, flying to this.

"They're us," she choked out. Bile was rising in her throat and her stomach heaved. "I thought it was possible. The Master has the Doctor's TARDIS, but he could only travel between the years 100 Trillion and last year—the Doctor managed to fuse the coordinates. They're people from the end of the universe, human beings." She stared at the face in the metal sphere, revulsion written in her eyes and the twist of her lips. "They're us."

"But that's a paradox!" Dougherty protested. "They can't be us, it would mean that they've come back in time to kill their ancestors! Shouldn't they, I don't know, dissolve or something?"

"That's where the paradox machine comes in," the Bad Wolf spoke up from her position behind them. She pushed herself off the wall she'd been leaning against and moved closer to the Toclofane—the human, if it could be called that. "A living TARDIS, the last in the universe. The only thing capable of sustaining the strain on the timelines turned into a machine to do just that."

"But why?" Tom cried. "If you're human beings why kill us?"

"Because it's so much fun!" the thing responded. Martha turned paler, if possible. The Bad Wolf looked away, and Tom Milligan pulled his gun from its holster and filled the thing with bullets.

"They say that you alone can kill the Master." Professor Dougherty's voice was loud in the silence. "Can you do it, Martha Jones? Is it true?"

Martha pulled herself together and tore her eyes away from the thing that had been a human being, once. "It's why I've been travelling. The Master and the Doctor have been coming to Earth for years,
you see, and they've been watched. There's UNIT and Torchwood and a host of other agencies, even private individuals. There was a man named Clive Finch who ran a website tracking him, and after he was killed another man named Mickey Smith took over. But anyway, the Doctor worked with UNIT for a while in the sixties, and they realized that having a weapon against hostile Time Lords would be a good idea." She pulled a slim black case out of her pack and opened it. Three vials rested in the top, with room for a fourth. A strange contraption that looked like a cross between a gun and a hypodermic needle rested on the bottom. "Four chemicals. Inject the Master with this and it'll kill him stone dead."

Tom held out his gun. "Get me close enough and I'll kill him with this."

Martha shook her head. "Time Lords have this trick, this way of cheating death. They can literally bring themselves back to life."

"So the Master's immortal, then. Perfect." Dougherty's voice was caustic and she rolled her eyes.

"Inject him with this and he won't regenerate. He'll be dead and stay dead."

"That's why Martha Jones came back." It was the Bad Wolf's turn to speak. "The last chemical is housed in an abandoned UNIT facility nearby, but you need someone who knows the place, its traps and secrets." Her lips twisted into a predatory grin. "And that's where I come in."

"They say that Martha Jones has returned home." The Master's voice cut across the silence of the room. In his bird cage hanging from the ceiling, the Doctor did not respond. "Why would she do that? What are you planning?"

"I have one thing to say to you," he reminded the Master. "You know what it is."

"Oh no!" The other Time Lord's face was a mask of mad fury. "You don't get that line. This is my turn! My empire! All made possible by humans." He was close to the cage now, his face almost touching the bars. "Little Red Riding Hood is about to meet the Big Bad Wolf."

Something in the Doctor's eyes shifted. "What did you say?"

"You heard me," the Master snorted.

"Why those words? Why the wolf?"

"Why does it matter?" The Master frowned. "What do they mean to you?" He was intrigued, but the Doctor refused to answer. After the silence stretched into minutes, he turned on his heel and left. He had better things to do than wait for his captive to grace him with the sound of his voice. He would talk eventually, oh, he would talk.

It was dark when they reached the relative safety of the slave compound. "It's cheaper than building barracks," Tom explained as he led them into one of the packed houses. "A hundred people to each house, and every morning they're ferried to the shipyards."

"Did you bring food?" one of the women called.

Tom shook his head. "I couldn't get any, I'm sorry."

"All we've got is water," a man offered.
"Are you Martha Jones?" She turned to face the young man who had asked. "They say you can kill the Master. Can you do it? Really, can you kill him? Tell me you can, please say that you can." Her reply was lost in the roar of voices that followed, questions, pleas, prayers from a hundred mouths crowded the air.

One voice stood out. It was close, almost on top of them. "Rose Tyler, it is you!"

Martha blinked as the Bad Wolf's head whipped to the side. "Sarah Jane Smith!" she cried, and then she was hugging a petite brunette woman. They were laughing and Martha was shocked to see tears streaming down the Bad Wolf's—Rose's—face. Wait. Rose. Rose.

Rose, her name was. You're not replacing her.

Rose would know.

The North wind blows, and carries down the distant—Rose?

Oh, big mistake, because that name keeps me fighting!

I came here with Rose...

He had this friend...

She's just an invention. Rose, I call her. Rose. She seems to disappear later on.

She gasped. "Oh my god. You're that Rose. You're the Doctor's Rose."

The Bad Wolf, Rose, turned to face her. "How do you know who I am?" Her voice was guarded and her shoulders tense.

Martha choked out a laugh. "He talked about you, a lot."

She shook her head. "He doesn't do that." Her face was carefully blank. "He just moves on."

"I think you'll find he's changed a bit," the other woman—Sarah Jane, said gently. Her eyes were sad as she laid a comforting hand on Rose's arm. "He came to see me after Canary Wharf. I saw your name on the list, but he said that you weren't dead, that you were trapped in a parallel world. I've never seen him like that, Rose. He was just—blank. Flat. And then he tried to hide it with a grin and a lot of babble, but it was there. He missed you."

"Still does." It was Martha's turn to speak now. Her voice was level and low. "It drove me crazy. I was right there in front of him doing all these incredible things, and then he'd look right through me. He misses you, and he'll be glad to see you again." She took a deep breath. "But now it's time for me to do what I came here to do." She turned to the rest of the people crowding around them. "You want me to talk? I'll talk. But not about me. There's someone else you should know about—the man who sent me here, who told me to walk the Earth."

She told them about the Doctor; about everything she'd seen him do, all the times they'd saved the Earth together. She told them about his people and his planet and everything that he'd sacrificed to keep them safe. She remembered after she told them that she loved the Doctor that the woman he loved, the one he remembered even when he forgot himself, was standing in the room with her. She glanced at Rose, but there was no anger on the woman's face. Instead a sad understanding glimmered in her eyes. Martha told the people to pass on what they knew, to tell everyone, and then she fell silent.
Rose stepped forward. "Feels like I've been preparing for this forever," she said slowly. "Everywhere I've been, trying to get back here, I end up telling this story." And then she began to speak. She told them about how she met the Doctor in the basement of a shop in London, surrounded by mannequins brought to life. She told them about seeing the Earth burn in the year five billion and understanding suddenly what it was like to be completely and utterly alone. She told them about the Slitheen and blowing up Downing street, about the Daleks and the Time War, about the Sycorax, about Queen Victoria and the Wire and the Beast and the Isolus and finally she told them about Torchwood, about Canary Wharf and the void. She didn't tell them that she loved the Doctor, but she didn't need to. Martha could see it shining out of her. The affection and pride and overwhelming trust burned in her voice.

And then, to her surprise, Sarah Jane stood next to Rose. "You've got three people here who have travelled with the Doctor. He never stays, he never stops, and he never asks for your thanks, but right now he needs you. He can fix this," she gestured to their surroundings. "All of it. He can fix everything, but he needs your help."

A woman burst through the door. "He's here! The Master is here!"

"Hide them!" another person yelled, and Rose and Martha were pushed down on the stairs and covered with a coat. People clustered around them, shielding them from prying eyes.

The Master stalked through the deserted streets of the slave compound. Soldiers followed him, guns at the ready. He grinned as he stopped in the middle of the street. "Martha, Martha Jo-ones!" he called in a sing-song voice. "Come out come out wherever you are!" Silence was the only response he received. "Either you come out, Miss Jones," he went on in a normal voice, "or I give the order, and my lovely boys will start shooting. Ask yourself, what would the Doctor do?"

Martha pushed the coat off of her and stood. Hands grasped at her as she moved down the stairs to stand by the door. Tom Milligan grabbed her arm. "Don't go," he pleaded. "He'll kill you."

"I have to," she responded with a sad smile. She studied him for a moment, and then did something she'd wanted to do all night. She stood on her tip-toes and pressed a quick kiss to his lips. Then she was out the door and in the street.

Tom watched through the mail slot as she walked to the Master, as she threw the pack containing their one hope at his feet, as he destroyed it with a blast from his laser screwdriver. He rested his head against the cool wood of the door. It was over. They were dead, all of them. The world would burn and nothing mattered any more.

"You have a friend in there, Miss Jones." The Master's voice drifted through the air again. "I'd like to meet them. Come out, or Martha Jones dies."

Tom pushed himself away from the door and went to open it, but a hand on his arm stopped him. He turned, and stared at the Bad Wolf, at Rose, he reminded himself.

"You are a good man, Thomas Milligan," she said quietly, "and there's no need for you to die tonight." She gave him a small smile. "That's my job. Stay put. Keep them safe, and remember what we told you. Remember the Doctor." And then she was gone.

Martha didn't turn around when she heard the door close softly. She stared at the Master, holding back rage, not fear. Now the real plan began.

"Who are you then?" he asked the person behind her.
"I'm the big Bad Wolf," Rose replied. She didn't sound afraid at all, if anything, scorn coated her words and made them razor sharp. The Master seemed amused.

"What does that make me, the Woodsman?" he sneered.

She shook her head. "You're the three little pigs, and I'm going to huff, and I'm going to puff, and then Martha Jones and I are going to blow your house down."
He laughed, and then Martha did turn to look at them. Rose was standing a few feet behind her, looking for all the world as if she was totally and completely at home. The Master circled her, expression intent.

"Oh, I like you," he said as a slow smile spread across his face. "You're feisty!" He continued to move around her, but she stared straight ahead. "There's something…off, about you." He was close now, close enough to touch her, close enough to see her pulse throbbing in her neck, to smell the vanilla and almonds in her shampoo—and something else. He stopped perpendicular to her, his chest inches from her side, his lips centimeters from her ear. "You reek of the Time Vortex." He shifted and licked her cheek. "I can taste it on your skin." His voice was low, intimate, and sent shivers of revulsion down Martha's spine—and he wasn't even touching her. She didn't know how Rose could stand so still, could keep her eyes focused on the soldiers in front of them instead of on the monster beside her.

"So that's who you are!" His face was jubilant. "You're the Doctor's Rose. You absorbed the Time Vortex itself, the heart of the TARDIS. And then you got lost. Little girl wandering through the forest alone," his voice dropped lower, threatening, "until she found a wolf."

"You've got it wrong." Rose turned her face to stare at him, lips and nose almost brushing his. "I'm the wolf."

"You were the wolf," he corrected her. "The Doctor took it out of you, took away your fangs and claws. Now you're just Red Riding Hood, defenseless little girl." The easy smile dropped from his face and the light disdain from his voice. "When I kill you, I want the Doctor to watch. I want to see his face when I cut open your chest and pull out your single, human heart." His face twisted into a grimace. "To the Valiant, Martha Jones, Rose Tyler. Let's not keep the Doctor waiting."

The Master was nowhere to be seen. Jack Harkness glanced around the bridge of the aircraft carrier Valiant. Francine and Tish, both dressed in demeaning maid outfits stood across from him, also under heavy guard. Clive was next to them. The Doctor was at Jack's right, closer to the controls, still in his cage.

The Master had a lot to answer for. He murdered millions, no, billions. He tormented the Jones family relentlessly. He killed Jack over and over and over again. He reduced the Doctor to living like an animal, trapped and tortured. For a year he held them here, delighting in their misery and pain like the sadist he was. Rage bubbled within Captain Jack Harkness. Their attempt at escape had failed. The Master's screwdriver had isomorphic controls. He, and he alone, could use it, and the Doctor's screwdriver was broken—destroyed by the Master.

He wanted to make the Master pay. He wanted to give him a taste of his own medicine—kill him over and over again until he ran out of regenerations, and then withhold the last death; he wanted to lock him in a prison for ages and let him rot, wrap him in unbreakable chains forged in the heart of a
dwarf star and listen to him scream out his loneliness and despair. He pushed the feelings down. Whatever he thought, the Master was a Time Lord, and that made him the Doctor's responsibility, not his own. Despite their differences of opinion, and the fact that the Doctor left him stranded on Satellite five, Jack would stand behind whatever he did to the Master. Even if he let him live.

The doors to the room burst inward as the Master strode onto the bridge of the Valiant, followed by his wife and retainers. He grinned at Jack and slapped Tish's bum on his way to the Doctor. Jack dug his fingernails into his palms until he could feel blood dripping down his hands. Francine hugged Tish to her and Clive watched the Master go, cold hatred written in every line on his face. The Master stopped by the Doctor's cage.

"I have a surprise for you," he said. A mad grin twisted his face. "I do hope you enjoy it." He bounded up the stairs to stand on the control platform, and turned to face the door. "Bring them in!" he commanded.

The double-doors opened again, and two women entered the room, escorted by four soldiers. The one on the left was Martha Jones. The other was unfamiliar. She was taller than Martha, with brown hair a little longer than her shoulders. It obscured her face, which was downcast and turned away. The soldiers marched them to just below the stairs to the control panel. The Master descended.

"Saint Martha," he spat. "Say goodbye to your family. It's the last time you'll ever see them. But you, Doctor. I thought you might like to say goodbye to her." He grabbed a handful of the brunette's hair and pulled it cruelly, twisting her face up and around so that Jack and the Doctor could see.

He stopped breathing. It was Rose. She was older, and no longer blonde, but it was Rose. The Doctor remained silent. "She's pretty, I'll give you that," the Master sneered. "Luscious lips, this one." He bent his head and kissed her with bruising intensity. A low growl built in Jack's throat. He ached to rip her away from him, to drive his fist into the Time Lord's face until it was a mass of broken bone and blood. The Master jerked his head away from Rose with a sharp cry. He touched a finger to his tongue. It was coated in blood. "Bitch!" he snapped and back-handed her, hard. She rocked back, but kept her balance. Deliberately she bent over and spat on the ground at his feet. Jack grinned. "You'll never guess where I found her," the Master continued, conversationally as he glared at Rose. "She was helping Martha, can you believe it? You went and replaced her, and what does she do? She takes care of the new kid."

The wolf is at the door.

The little-girl-who-wasn't-a-girl's words blazed through his mind. Rose was back. But the wolf, she couldn't mean—

"Only here's what I don't understand. She doesn't go around calling herself 'Rose Tyler.' No, she tells everyone she's the 'Bad Wolf.'" He snorted. "That's worse than 'the Doctor,' for a name." He leaned his face close to Rose's exposed throat. "Now, why would she go and do that?" The Doctor said nothing, but he stared at Rose like he'd seen a ghost. Maybe he had. "Don't feel like talking today? No matter. I don't need you to talk to kill them." He shoved Rose away. She staggered, but didn't fall.

The Master resumed his place on the control platform, and pointed his laser screwdriver at Rose and Martha. "Kneel." They did so. Rose glanced at Jack and the Doctor. "200,000 ships set to burn across the universe," the Master proclaimed. "Today, Earth goes to war!" He pressed the intercom button on the side panel. "Is the fleet prepared?" An affirmative crackled over the speakers. He glanced at his watch. "Three minutes to align the black hole converters. Counting down!" A digital display began beeping away the second. "I never could resist a ticking clock." Deliberately he
stalked down the stairs, until he was only a few feet away from Rose and Martha. "When the countdown reaches zero, you will both die." He straightened, assuming a position of nobility like he was some great orator out of history. "Bow your head."

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They did so, but Martha couldn't keep a faint smirk off her face. "And so it falls to me, as Master of all to establish from this day, a new order of Time Lords. From this day forward—"

It was too much. Martha snickered, and then Rose laughed, loud and scornful.

The Master stopped, a muscle in his jaw twitching. "What—what's so funny?"

"Do you really want to know?" Rose asked.

"Know what?"

"What the Bad Wolf is."

He rolled his eyes. "Enlighten me."

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Her head was high now, her eyes flashing. "The Bad Wolf is me and the TARDIS, together, acting as one. She's alive, and you tore her to pieces and crafted her to sustain something that normally would pull her apart. She's screaming, and I can hear her in my head. So I ought to thank you, because that's why I'm here. You brought me here." Her voice was triumphant. "And I brought Martha Jones. Everywhere she went, I made sure you wouldn't get to her. I made sure she got what she needed to end this."

100

"That's fascinating and all, but I destroyed the gun," he pointed out.

"A gun?" Martha asked incredulously. "A gun in four parts. A gun in four parts scattered across the world." An expression very like pity stole across her features. "And you actually believed that?"

The superiority was draining ever-so-slowly from the Master's face. "What do you mean?"

The Doctor spoke then. "As if I would ask her to kill." He didn't look at Rose, instead, he focused on the Master.

80

He shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I've got both of them, all of you, exactly where I want you."

"Except that I knew it would happen." Martha was grinning now, the picture of frightened obedience long gone. "The resistance knew about Professor Dougherty's son, and I used that to get me here, where I needed to be, when I needed to be."

"None of this matters!" the Master cried. "You're still going to die!"

"Don't you want to know what I was really doing when I was walking the Earth?" Martha asked.

60
He rolled his eyes. "Go on then, tell me."

"I told a story. That's it. No guns, no bombs, just words." Her voice swelled with confidence, growing louder and louder. "I told them about the Doctor, I told them my story, and I told them to pass it on, to tell everyone they could so that the whole world would know."

"So faith and hope—that's your plan?" Derision dripped from his voice.

"No. I gave them an instruction," she replied as she stood. "I told them that if everyone thinks of one word at one specific time—"

"Nothing will happen! Prayer, is that your weapon?"

"All across the world, one word, one thought, one moment—but with fifteen satellites."

The Master froze. "What?"

"The Archangel Network," Rose put in. She was standing as well. "The telepathic field connecting the entire human race. Every man, woman, and child thinking one thing: Doctor."

Flickers of light surrounded the Doctor's cage. The Master stared at him. "Stop it!" he yelled. "Stop it now!" The light coalesced, forming a blinding cocoon around the Doctor.

"You can't stop it." His voice boomed out from inside the light. "Because that's the one thing you can't stop them doing, you can't stop them thinking!"

"No no no no no, you can't do this!" The Master aimed his screwdriver at the light, but the beam was absorbed harmlessly.

"But I can. I've had a whole year to attune myself to the psychic network and integrate with its matrices." The light elongated, growing taller as the Doctor's form regressed back to his original appearance.

"I order you to stop this!" the Master screamed.

"Order all you like. I have one thing to say to you."

"No!" He pointed the screwdriver at Rose and Martha. "I'll kill them!"

The Doctor stretched out his hand, and the screwdriver flew harmlessly to the floor several feet away. "Tell me the human race is degenerate now, when they can do this!" He lifted his arms, and the light, the energy bore him aloft. Martha ran to her family. Tish and Francine pulled her into a tight hug while Clive wrapped his arms around all of them.

Jack watched Rose. She stood, eyes closed, head tilted back, a small smile playing across her lips as the wind generated by the psychic energy whipped her hair around. She was back. He still couldn't believe it was true. Rose was back.

The Doctor drew near the Master, who was backing away. "You can't! It's not fair!"
"I'm sorry," he said as he continued his inexorable path. "I'm so sorry, but you know what happens next."

"No!" He backed away, his hands over his ears, until he hit the wall and dropped to the ground. The energy began to fade and the Doctor descended. He walked to the Master, dropped to his knees, and wrapped his arms around the struggling Time Lord. "I forgive you," he said softly.

"No!" The Master continued to writhe, his hands over his ears. "No! My children!"

The Doctor sprang up from his place on the floor. "Jack! The TARDIS! Destroy the paradox machine!"

He nodded and gestured to the four soldiers. "You men, with me! We've got some maintenance to carry out!" They dashed from the room. The Master was struggling with Jack's Vortex Manipulator, but Rose ripped it out of his hands and tossed it to Martha.

"You're not going anywhere," she said quietly.

The Master laughed, and held out a small remote control. "I've still got this."

"We've got control of the Valiant," Martha pointed out. "You'll never be able to launch."

"I don't need to launch," the Master snarled. "Inside every rocket is a black hole converter. I push this switch and the entire world will explode. Just like Gallifrey."

"Weapon after Weapon after Weapon, and all you do is talk and talk and talk." The Doctor stalked over, hands in his pockets, to stand beside Rose in front of the Master. "All through the years, disaster after disaster, I've had the greatest secret of them all." He regarded the other Time Lord calmly. "I know you. If you push that button, you'll destroy the Earth, and yourself, and that's something you can't do. You never could. You cling to life whatever way you can." He held out his hand. "Give it to me."

The Master stared at him for a moment, and then grudgingly gave him the remote control. The Doctor pocketed it, and turned to face Rose.

"Rose Tyler," the words were like a caress. A soft smile played about his lips as he cupped her face in one long-fingered hand. Martha found she was holding her breath. Her own feelings for the Doctor gnawed on her insides, but there was something so right about the two of them together. Maybe it was the way her eyes closed as his hand brushed against the skin of her cheek, maybe it was the expression on his face—so different from any she'd seen before, or maybe it was the way he said her name, the warmth in his voice and the blinding brilliance of her answering smile.

Something on the control platform beeped. He grinned at Rose, and dashed up the steps. She followed. "I expect a proper hello from you after this is sorted!" she called after him.

"We have incoming! The Toclofane," he said the word as if it left a disgusting taste in his mouth, "are returning to protect the paradox machine."

"Jack will fix it," Rose said confidently. "Although, I'd like an explanation as to what he's doing here obviously alive and well along with that hello."

"When this is sorted," the Doctor agreed, his eyes lingering on her face.

"The Toclofane are disappearing!" Tish cried. The Doctor and Rose turned, and sure enough, the metallic spheres of death wavered and vanished like a mirage on a hot day.
"He did it!" Rose exclaimed. The bridge began to shake violently.

"Doctor!" Martha called as she tried to remain upright. "What's happening?"

"Everybody down!" he yelled as he grabbed Rose and pulled her to the floor. "The paradox is broken; time is reversing!" The past year was unraveling, subsuming itself into the proper timeline and they were at the eye of the storm. It was like being at the epicenter of an earthquake. The universe bucked and shifted around them as they clung to each other. When it calmed they were lying on the floor a year ago. Various officials sat at the table or stood clustered around. The body of President Winters lay sprawled on the floor behind his podium. Two UNIT soldiers grabbed the Master and slapped handcuffs on his wrists.

Rose leaned against the wall, her eyes closed. A truly spectacular headache was building behind her left eye. Being at the heart of a frayed Time stream was an experience she was not eager to repeat. Travelling via Dimension Cannon was hard enough. She grinned. Of course, now that she'd found the Doctor she doubted that transport would be a problem. Still, it they weren't in the clear yet.

Cleaning up the Master's mess had taken hours. UNIT had wanted to keep him in custody, as he was a dangerous alien, but the Doctor persuaded them that he was a bit beyond what they could handle. Dangerous didn't begin to describe him. Then, of course, they had to explain what was going on to the assorted World Leaders and officials who were present. Despite years working at the parallel Torchwood and dealing with a fair number of situations similar to their current circumstances, Rose was exhausted. She would be glad when she and the Doctor could adapt his usual plan of action, i.e. swan off before anyone had the chance to ask them to explain or participate in the clean up.

She opened her eyes as footsteps drew closer to her. Jack, still filthy from his time spent in the bowels of the Valiant, grinned at her. "Never did get a proper hello from you," he said nonchalantly. "Come 'ere you!" She opened her arms and he swept her into a hug. She laughed as he spun her around. "Okay Jack, you can put me down, now!"

"How did you do it, Rose?" He set her down but kept hugging her. "The Doctor said you were gone—trapped in a parallel world."

"I was." Her voice was quiet. "For a long time, I was. But then something happened, I'm not sure what. The Dimension Cannon started working, and I ended up in this universe. Not in the right time, of course." Her voice was thick with irony. "Not even in the right galaxy. Had to mug a couple dozen time Agents to get the right parts after my transport burned out. Traveling dimensions is hard on tech, apparently. And even after it was fixed I had to track him down and make sure I didn't disrupt the time lines."

"I'm glad you're back."

She pulled away enough to smile up at him. "Me too, Jack. Me too. Although I'm not sure how you can be here."

"That's a story for later," Jack promised. He glanced around the room. They were alone, except for Martha, her family, and Lucy Saxon. He pitied the woman. The Master was not an easy person to live with. And while her part in the situation angered him, he knew that she'd been through just as much Hell as Martha's family, if not quite as much as he or the Doctor.

As if the Time Lord knew Jack was thinking of him, he strode into the room, pushing the Master
ahead of him. "What are you doing with that one?" Jack asked, dropping his arms from around Rose so that she could go to the Doctor.

"He's a Time Lord, that means he's my responsibility," the other man stated as he took Rose's hand. "He'll come with us on the TARDIS. I can keep an eye on him there, and keep him safe."

The Master sneered. "Go with you, as what, your pet? Travel the stars with you and your human bit of skirt? I'd rather die."

"That can be arranged." Francine's voice cut through the room. They turned to stare at her. She stood apart from her family, a revolver clenched in her hands. It was aimed at the Master. "You murdered billions of people," she spat. "You are a monster."

"Is this why you love human beings, Doctor?" the Master enquired, mockery written in every line of his body. "The greatest monsters of them all."

"Shut up!" Francine cried. "You tortured my family, you tried to kill my daughter, why shouldn't I kill you?"

The Doctor moved to place himself between her and the Master, but Rose pushed him back. She moved slowly, like she was trying to help a wounded animal. "You're Martha's mum, right?" She flashed a smile at Francine. "She talked about you. You slapped the Doctor the first time you met him." The smile returned. "My mum did the same thing." She was almost between them now. The Jack glanced at the Doctor. He was tense, hands curled into fists, fairly vibrating with the desire to shove Rose out of the way.

"Thing is, you don't want to do this, not really. You think it'll make you feel better, but it doesn't. It makes you feel worse."

"You don't understand," the older woman ground out between clenched teeth.

"I was there," Rose replied. "I followed Martha wherever she went. I saw it down there. I've wanted to lash out, to hurt someone because they hurt me, but pain doesn't negate pain. If anything, it increases it."

"No!" she yelled. "He's a monster!" She closed her eyes and squeezed. A shot rang out.

The Doctor frantically looked around the room. Martha and Tish were standing against the wall, looking dazed. Jack was all ready next to Francine, who had dropped the gun. He kicked it away from her. The Master stood where he was, unharmed and unconcerned. Then the Doctor saw where Jack was looking. He followed Francine's horrified gaze—to Rose. A brilliant red stain was spreading across the gray material of her jacket. She pressed her hand to her stomach and pulled it away. It was covered in blood. Her blood.

"Oh," she said softly. "Well." And then she collapsed.
The Choices We Make

Chapter Notes

Quotes taken from The End of the World, Dalek, New Earth, The Impossible Planet, Fear Her, The Army of Ghosts, Doomsday, and The Last of the Time Lords.

The Doctor caught Rose before she fell far, but he discovered that his own legs did not seem to be working at the moment. He let them fold beneath him and knelt, cradling her against him. Francine was staring at them. She covered her mouth with shaking hands. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to, I swear." The Doctor ignored her; he hardly even heard her. All of his attention was focused on the woman in his arms.

"Never got used to being shot," she murmured. He tried to smile, but his mouth wasn't working right either. That was Rose all over, even injured she tried to put a brave face on, to joke and relieve some of his worries.

"I'm glad of that." His voice was unusually harsh. Of course it was, he had been talking for hours with people from UNIT and several governments trying to explain what had happened on the Valiant. It wasn't worry that was making it hard for him to speak, that was squeezing his hearts so that he felt he couldn't breathe. Time Lords didn't worry. He smoothed the hair back from her face and submerged his consciousness into her body. He was so focused on trying to assess her injuries that he almost missed her voice.

"Doctor." He blinked, slightly confused. "Doctor. 'Sokay. I found you." She smiled. "Tell Sarah Jane…" she faltered for a moment, but continued, "tell her thanks, from me."

She thought she was going to die. Cold, furious anger coiled in his stomach. Not today, not like this. Not when he'd just found her again.

The Master was laughing. "Oh, well done! Well done Francine Jones!" he said with mocking approval. "You just caused more pain in thirty seconds—by accident—than I could in an entire year!"

No one noticed Lucy. For a year she'd cowered in his shadow. When she first met the man who called himself Harold Saxon he'd been wonderful: attentive, gentle, focused on her with an intensity that made her feel precious—loved. He hypnotized her with his smooth words and beautiful lies. He told her about who he really was, the Master, a Time Lord…an alien. He showed her the end of the universe, and she realized that everything she knew, everything that made up her life, was utterly meaningless—so she helped him conquer the world.

And then the Doctor came, and everything began to go wrong, because the man she knew was a lie. The Master was not gentle. When he wanted something—sex, cooperation, information, he took it from her. If she resisted, he hit her until she stopped. He hated human beings, thought they were beneath him, and in time she realized that the only reason she was with him was to mimic a pattern. He was a reflection of the Doctor, an antithesis. She wondered who she was impersonating.

The pieces fell into place when Martha Jones and the other woman arrived, when she saw the Doctor
and the brown-haired girl together. They were the pattern—the Doctor and the human woman he loved. And now everyone's attention was focused on the two of them. No one noticed Lucy pick up the gun from where Jack kicked it. No one noticed, not even the Master, as she very calmly aimed it at him. No one noticed when she pulled the trigger, but everyone heard the shot as she fired.

The Doctor's head snapped up in time to see the Master stagger and fall. He lay in front of the two of them, blood pooling beneath him.

"It's always the women," he choked. Jack took the gun from Lucy, who watched her husband with a glassy, detached expression. "Looks like you'll be the last of the Time Lords again," he said with a twisted smile.

"Nonsense," the Doctor bit back. "It's just a bullet. Regenerate."

The Master grated out a laugh. "Put the human down. Let her die and I will live."

The Doctor stared at him. He could feel the time lines straining. The path he was on split and he hovered at the crossroads. His relationship with the Master was never simple. Beneath the surface a thousand emotions writhed, a million memories. Friends, enemies, something in between. Time and time again they fought, and their battles shaped the contours of his soul.

One Time Lord survived, and it had to be him—his deadliest friend and dearest enemy. It couldn't be Susan, his granddaughter, who had nothing to do with the Time War besides that she had been born a Time Lady on Gallifrey. She was gone now, except in the memories of the people who knew her, taken out of time like the rest of his people. If he could save one, just one of them, if he wasn't alone —

And then he looked down at Rose. Her face was pale and the stain over her middle was getting larger. She was losing too much blood. If he wanted her to live, he needed to get her to the TARDIS, and now. But more than that, he looked down at the woman who had saved his life in so many ways.

**Better with two.**

**There's me.**

**Can I just say, traveling with you...I love it.**

**Stuck with you, that's not so bad.**

**They keep trying to split us up but they never ever will.**

**How long are you going to stay with me? Forever.**

**I made my choice a long time ago. I'm never leaving you.**

**I love you.**

**I've seen fake gods and bad gods and demigods and would-be-gods—out of all that, out of that whole pantheon, if I believe in one thing, just one thing—**

**I believe in her.**

He had a choice, he realized. The past or the future. Grow, or arrest. The Master, who changed his face, his entire body, but could not change himself, or Rose, who forced him to become more than
what he was. She drove him out of his comfort zone and brought him into her world, her family. She
made him a part of her life instead of remaining simply a part of his. She was more than a companion
—she was a partner. She was his equal in some things and his superior in so many others, including
the art of living.

Without change, without growth, the universe was stagnant.

He pulled Rose into his arms and stood, carrying her like a bride over the threshold. "No," he said
softly. He turned to Jack. "I've got to get her to the TARDIS. Bring him, after—" his throat closed
for a moment. He cleared it and continued. "Bring the rest of them down. We can take them home
later."

"I can help," Martha said, stepping forward. "I'm almost a doctor, after all."

He nodded, and they ran to the TARDIS.

Jack, Francine, Clive, and Tish sat around the table in the TARDIS kitchen. They hadn't been
phased at all by the incongruous ship, but he supposed that after a year with the Master, something
that was bigger on the inside wasn't as surprising as it would be usually. Francine and Tish were
sipping tea from a couple of mismatched mugs. Clive didn't want any, and Jack's own mug sat on the
table, the beverage inside slowly cooling. It should have been Rose putting the kettle on, dropping
the little bags in, measuring out sugar and milk just how they liked it. She was always making tea.
She would bring him and the Doctor mugs while they tinkered with the TARDIS, and sometimes
sandwiches too. Then she would curl up with her own on the jumpseat and watch them or read a
magazine. Sometimes she would fall asleep, and the Doctor would carry her to her bedroom when
they were finished and tuck her in.

Francine's voice broke through his thoughts. "Who is she?"

"A very good friend," he replied. "The last person I thought I'd ever see again."

She shook her head. "I mean, who is she, to the Doctor?"

Jack opened his mouth to reply, but someone else beat him to it.

"She's the woman he loves, Mum." Martha pulled a chair out next to Jack and sank into it.

"But I thought you and him…"

Martha groaned. "No, Mum. We're not like that, we never have been. I keep telling you that, and
you don't listen."

"She travelled with him before Martha," Jack said quietly. "She was with him when I met them." He
grinned. "I never did tell you that story, did I?" The other four shook their heads, and Jack launched
into the tale of how he almost ended the human race. It was good to talk about happier times, even
though they hadn't felt like happier times when he was living them. Martha didn't believe him when
he told her about rescuing Rose from death by barrage balloon.

"You're kidding!" she exclaimed.

He smiled. "I'm not. She was always a bit 'jeopardy friendly,' as the Doctor used to say."

"It's just, the way he talks about her…I always pictured her as some kind of blonde superwoman."
"She's human," Jack pointed out, "so human. And she was fantastic. She has more compassion than I've ever seen. She was the one who made me remember that I could be something besides a conman, but she wasn't perfect. She wandered off and got into trouble just like the rest of us."

"What was he like, when you met him?" she asked wistfully.

Jack examined the tea in his mug for a moment before he replied. "Remember what I said about regeneration?" She nodded. "He didn't look the same, for one. He had big ears and a big nose and these eyes that could see right through you. He looked like a soldier, but that was just after the Time War. He was brittle and angry and alone. This Doctor is manic energy and rushing about—he was rough edges and hard angles. He saved me because that's what he does—he saves people, but he gave me a chance to prove myself because Rose liked me."

"It all comes back to her," Martha commented. She knew that her family was watching them, and she was grateful that they kept silent. She tried to keep the bitterness out of her voice, but she knew she failed. She wanted to hate the other woman. It seemed like she had everything that Martha wanted. But after meeting her, after hearing her stories and knowing that for a year she was at least part of the reason that Martha was alive right now, hating her was difficult.

Jack placed a comforting hand on her arm. "There aren't words for what they are, Martha. I'm not sure I understand it, and I travelled with them for months. At first I thought that they were lovers, but it wasn't physical." He grinned. "Although they 'keep away' signs were about a million miles high." A distant look crept over his face. "I've never believed in what some people call 'true love.' I'm too practical, I think. It sounds nice, in the way that Father Christmas sounds nice—a lie you tell children so they grow up thinking the world is a beautiful place. But with them—you could believe it. They never talked about it, but when I was with them it was palpable." He grinned again. "Drove me crazy, it did. The tension on that ship could have lit a brick on fire. The number of cold showers I had to take…" That brought a smile to Martha's face. "The three of us made a good team, but it was always me, and the two of them. Rose falls in love with determination, and the Doctor," he sighed. "He has a very long memory."


"I don't know what losing her like this would do to him. I wasn't there when Canary Wharf happened, so I don't know what he was like after that, but now…” He shook his head. "She'll pull through. She's tougher than she looks."

It was almost an hour later when the Doctor strode into the kitchen.

"How is she?" Jack asked immediately.

"She'll live," he responded, relief plain on his face and in his voice. "I've sedated her. I have some things that need doing, Jack. She should stay asleep until I get back, but would you sit with her? I don't want her waking up alone."

Jack grinned. "Knowing Rose she'd end up wandering around the TARDIS trying to find you."

The Doctor responded with a small smile. "Exactly, and the old girl doesn't like it when we track blood all around." He turned his gaze to Martha and her family. "Time to go home."

Martha watched her family from the TARDIS door. Leo was back, with his girlfriend and Martha's niece. It was…strange, being around him. He hadn't been on the Valiant when the paradox was broken. He didn't remember the year-that-never-was. Her mum and dad were back together—
nothing like living through hell to help people who've grown apart reconnect. She wondered if that was why she loved the Doctor, because they were always running from danger or saving the day or a mix of both.

"Go on, Martha. Spend some time with your family. I'll pick you up after I'm done." The Doctor was fiddling with the console, pointedly ignoring the Master's body, which lay on the grating against the wall.

She drew a deep breath. She'd been thinking throughout the year—all her travels, really, and what happened on the Valiant crystalized what she had been working towards. "You don't have to come back for me," she said quietly. He looked up, confused. She smiled gently. "My family needs me, really needs me. They've just been through hell, and I've got a bit of experience in dealing with stuff like that. All those years I studied to be a doctor, and now I've finally got people to look after." She paused for a moment. She could leave now and he'd respect her reasons, but she needed to say it. "And you've got Rose. 'Cause, it's like my friend Vicky. She was living with this bloke, with a whole bunch of people really, but Shaun—she loved him, really loved him. She spent years pining after him, but he never looked at her twice. He liked her, but that was it."

"Is this going somewhere?" he asked. For someone who babbled on a bit he was certainly impatient.

"Keep your pants on," she chided him. "And yes, it is. Because I kept telling her to get out. As long as she stayed there she never even looked at anyone else. So this is me, getting out." She handed him her phone. "You keep that, and when it rings, you'd better come running."

He accepted it with a smile. "Yes ma'am."

She stepped out the door, and turned, smiling back at him. "I'll see you again, Doctor." And then she was gone.

The Doctor closed the TARDIS doors behind him and made his way to the infirmary. Jack was sitting on a chair next to the bed where Rose slept.

"She's still out," he said. "But she's been stirring more."

The Doctor nodded. "Her color is better." He brushed his fingers against her temples. "She'll wake soon." He smiled wryly. "If she had to get shot, at least she did when I had access to the infirmary. Medicine is woefully backward in the twenty-first century."

Jack grinned. "You're telling me. I had to live through most of the twentieth. Thank god I didn't get sick often."

"I'm sorry I left you behind, Jack," the Doctor said quietly.

He shrugged. "Water under the bridge."

"You could travel with us. I know Rose would like it…"

Jack shook his head. "I did a lot of thinking when I was chained up on the Valiant. I've got my team now. Like you said, Doctor: responsibilities. That doesn't mean that you two have to be strangers," he said severely. "I expect regular visits from the both of you."

The Doctor smiled. "I don't think you'll be able to keep Rose away, and where she goes,"

"You go," Jack finished. The Doctor nodded. "I'll wait to leave until she wakes up," Jack said as he
stood, relinquishing his seat to the Doctor. "It'll be nice to say a proper goodbye."

The first thing Rose Tyler noticed when she woke was that something was trapping her arm against the bed. She shifted, but her arm remained where it was, firmly underneath something heavy and cool. She opened her eyes and blinked. She knew this place. When she travelled with the Doctor she spent far too much time in the infirmary, either cleaning him up or being cleaned up herself. She twisted her head around to see what was lying on her arm, and got a face-full of wild brown hair.

"Oi!" she protested. "What are you, a bloody cat?" The hair shifted and a face came into view. Her eyes traced the familiar features; the warm brown eyes, the nose, the sharp jaw and cleft chin. The thin lips spread into a wide, joyful smile.

"Hello," the Doctor said softly.

She smiled in response, blinking to keep the moisture that threatened to overflow in her eyes. She would not cry, not now. "Hello."

He stroked her hair as he drank her in. "You, Rose Marian Tyler, are an impossible thing."

"You like impossible things," she said with a grin, her tongue between her teeth.

"Yes," he said quietly. "I do. Especially when they're you."
It was three days before the Doctor declared Rose well enough to run for her life. If she had been in a conventional hospital it would have taken weeks for her body to heal; just one more benefit of life in the TARDIS. Another benefit was, of course, the ability to travel in time, which allowed one Captain Jack Harkness to remain with the Doctor and Rose for three days and still return to his team just after he left. Leaving the two of them was more difficult than he thought it would be, even with Rose's promise of frequent visits and the Doctor's promise to indulge her. The TARDIS was home, but more than that—the two of them were home. It would have been easy to fall into familiar patterns, but that wasn't fair to either of them, to his team, or to himself. Responsibilities, after all.

"Besides," he told the Doctor before they materialized, "I have a sneaking suspicion that you'll want the TARDIS to yourself for a while." His lascivious grin left no doubt as to why that would be. The Doctor rolled his eyes. Rose remained oblivious.

They left him on the Plass with hugs and promises. Some of them they might even keep.

The Doctor took them into the Vortex with the push of a few buttons and the flip of a switch. He turned to Rose, who released the railing and wandered around the console to meet him.

"I think it's time we talked about how you got here," the Doctor began. "And why my very accurate, perfectly calibrated machine lists your biological age as 204."

She swallowed, the easy smile gone from her face. "It's a long story."

He folded his arms across his chest, a gesture that reminded her of his past self so much it almost hurt. "We've got time."

She glanced around the console room. "Right. Can we…can we do this somewhere else?"

He uncrossed his arms and took her hand. "Of course."

They ended up in the library. Rose curled up on the love seat, her feet underneath her and a pillow crushed to her chest. The Doctor sat next to her, hands folded in his lap.

She drew a shaky breath, and began. "After Bad Wolf Bay I tried to do what you'd want me to, have a fantastic life and all that. For a while I did. I had Mum and Pete and Tony—my little brother—and Torchwood." The Doctor frowned. Something in her voice hardened when she mentioned the institute. "We changed it, Pete and I. We made it better." She paused for a moment. "When Tony was ten we realized that I wasn't aging, not like I should have been, anyway. I looked maybe twenty three…when I was thirty. We brushed it off at first, good genetics and all that—but then," she met his gaze, tears hovering in her eyes. "People started thinking Mum was my gran, that Tony and I were siblings." He squeezed her hand in sympathy. She smiled at him weakly. "Some people wanted to figure out why—guess they thought I could give them the secret to eternal life or whatever, but
Pete wouldn't let them. After he died," her voice shifted, became rougher, angrier. "After he died everything went to hell. There was an invasion, and we couldn't stop it. We drove them off eventually, but that wasn't good enough. There was a power struggle, and I lost. Everything that I worked for disappeared overnight." She took another deep breath, and forged ahead. "They told me I was going on a special assignment, very dangerous, probably no contact for long periods of time, that sort of thing. I woke up in a holding cell." He pressed his lips into a thin line. He could tell where this story was going, and it filled him with a sinking revulsion. When she continued, her tone was detached, clinical. "They took me apart and put me back together. They ran tests, so many tests. They found out how much pain I could tolerate, hooked my brain up to one of those imaging things and pumped me full of drugs to see how my body would react. If Tony hadn't found out what was going on they probably would have killed me, just to see what would happen."

"Oh Rose." He pulled her into his arms. She was shaking; the effort it took to tell her story plain in the tension of her body. He was angry, no, he was furious. The Doctor knew what torture was like. He'd had people experiment on him. No one deserved that, especially not Rose. She went limp against him, her hands fisted in his jacket, holding on to him like he was a lifeline and she was drowning. After a long moment she pulled away from him. He let her go, but kept his arms loosely around her. She rearranged herself so that she could lean against him, her back against his chest, one of his legs stretched out on the couch while the other dangled off the side, her body in between. It was a more intimate position than either of them was used to, but it felt right the same way that her hand in his felt right, that her presence on the TARDIS felt right.

"He got me out, Tony, I mean. He broke in and gave me this." She held up the Dimension Cannon. It looked a bit like Jack's Vortex Manipulator, but much more complex. "It was supposed to be a way to cross through the universes, but it travels through time and space as well. We started working on it as soon as I began at Torchwood, but the dimension hopping bit never worked, until one day it did." She bit her bottom lip. "That was 170 years after I ended up in Pete's world. I don't know why it decided to function, but I think it had to do with the strain that the Master's paradox put on the time lines. After that I was in the right universe, but the wrong galaxy and the wrong time. It took me thirteen years to find the right time, mostly because my transport burned out and I had to get parts." She grinned. "I had to mug Time Agents to get most of them."

He laughed. "I bet Jack was proud."

She nodded. "He taught me everything I know."

"So," he said, trying to keep his voice casual, "what did you do after you escaped?"

He could feel the tension return. "I hid, mostly. Kept my head down, moved around a lot. There was no UNIT in Pete's world, no organization I could turn to for sanctuary. Torchwood was world-wide, and they had very long arms." She shuddered. His arms tightened around her.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly, almost a whisper. "I'm so sorry."

"Not your fault," she replied flatly, "so don't you dare go blaming yourself."

"If I had taken that lever—"

"Then you would have ended up in a parallel world, and this universe would be in trouble."

"Doctor, if you want to blame someone, blame the people who are responsible. Blame the stupid apes who couldn't see beyond the end of their own noses."
Her face was close to his, their noses almost touching. Her eyes were large and dark and warm, and in them he could read her determination, her strength, the fractured pain that cut into him like knives, the complete trust and absolute denial of blame, the affection and love that underwrote every word and action. Time Lords were telepathic. Several of his selves were quite good with their mental powers; they could read minds and influence others with a thought. He could walk in a person's mind and view their memories if he so chose, with a touch. He never needed to, with Rose. Her eyes were windows into her soul and she left them open for him to see. It was humbling and terrifying, the depths of emotion her feelings evoked in him. 'Don't get involved with companions' was a rule he had come close to breaking before, but not like this. He reached up and pushed a wayward lock of hair back behind her ear. Her eyes closed as the tips of his fingers ghosted across her cheek. He didn't believe in inevitable, but this felt like it was.

"I never did get to give you a proper hello," he mused as they stared at each other. And then his hand was moving again like gravity, up her arm to her shoulder, behind her neck, tangled in her hair, and her lips met his and he couldn't remember why they weren't always doing this. She was soft and warm and kissing her was like coming home. She cradled his face in her hands and his remaining hand slid up her back, pulling her closer to him. Her emotions ran along his skin like water—fear and loss and pain and desperation and relief and joy and underneath everything, hope. They met his own, buried just beneath the surface of his mind and his carefully constructed walls dissolved beneath them. He knew that she could see him, could feel him, but he couldn't stop. He was tired of being alone, because he had been alone even when Martha was with him. He was tired of denying himself something that every being in the universe had a right to: the opportunity to love and be loved without condition or price. And she did. He took her to see the death of her planet, and she mourned the loss of his. He told her the part he played in the destruction of his own people, and her first thought was for him. She saw the darkest parts of him and did not flinch. She gave him absolution when he believed himself beyond hope or forgiveness. She challenged him when he was on the verge of toppling into darkness.

She always came back.

He pulled away from her and his body cried out against the loss of contact. Her lips were red and swollen and her eyes were half-hooded as she blinked in confusion. "I love you, Rose Tyler," he said. "Ever since I saw you swinging on that chain in the sewer, saving my life with gymnastics. And when you were—gone—what I regretted the most was that I didn't have the courage to say it outright."

She stroked his cheeks with her thumbs and he closed his eyes in pleasure. "I knew I was never going to leave you since Satellite One, since you told me about your planet. I think I've loved you since you grabbed my hand and told me to run. Everything that you did, you did alone, but it's better with two."

"It's better," he corrected, "with you." And then he kissed her again, and there were no more words.

He left her in his bed, curled up around his pillow, sound asleep. The TARDIS hummed around him, somehow seeming to convey approval. He ran his hand along the wall as he made his way to the console room. Everything was changing. He felt like he was a rudderless ship at the mercy of the current, but for once he could not bring himself to care. She was back, and he loved her, and he was never going to let her go. They were impossible, the two of them, and he liked impossible. And maybe, just maybe, the universe would be kind.

"Hello old girl," he said as he laid a hand affectionately on the TARDIS console. "Let's just double-check those stabilizers—" He jerked his hand back as a shower of sparks erupted from the controls.
"What are you doing?" Irritation made his voice sharp. The ever-present hum of the TARDIS shifted in pitch and a brief sense of annoyance washed over him. The lights pulsed the way he had come. "She's asleep," he explained to his ship. "What do you expect me to do, lay there all night and wait for her to wake up? Because I can tell you, it'll be hours. You remember how much Rose likes to sleep." The ship was not impressed. "She'll slap me if I wake her up," he continued, and even he had to admit that he sounded like a petulant child. The lights in the hallway that led to his bedroom pulsed again, more insistently, and another shower of sparks made him dance away from the console. "All right, all right!" he grumbled and threw up his hands. "But if she slaps me, I'm blaming you."

As it happened, Rose did not slap the Doctor. He could sense her as he opened the door, the rough edges of her dreams brushed against his mind. Her breathing was faster than it should be. He frowned as he padded to the bed, his bare feet silent on the carpeted floor. She was talking in her sleep, fearful whimpers interspersed with murmured words.

"Stop...don't, please...it hurts..." Her face twisted into a mask of pain.

He touched her shoulder. "Rose, wake up. It's a dream."

Her eyes snapped open and before the Doctor realized what was happening he was lying on his back on the floor with Rose on top of him. One hand was clenched around his throat and the other held his hands above his head. She blinked at him for a moment, and then released him. "Don't do that, please," she said quietly and sat on the edge of the bed.

He stared at her as he sat next to her. "You were having a nightmare."

She bit her lip. "Yeah. Happens a lot." She stared at her hands, folded in her lap.

He laid his hand on top of hers. "Tell me about it?"

She shuddered. "I was back in that holding cell at Torchwood." The haunted look on her face made his hearts clench. "They were...testing me." Her voice was soft, so soft that if he hadn't been a Time Lord with superior biology, he probably wouldn't have heard what she said next. "They hurt me."

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into his lap. She clung to him much like she had in the library. "They can't get you here, Rose. They're a whole universe away."

"I know," she said, speaking into his shirt. "Stupid of me, I know, but every time I close my eyes they're waiting."

"It's not stupid at all," he replied as he stroked her back. "It was traumatic and horrible and if we were in the same universe I'd be paying them a visit right now, but they're not." He laid his cheek against the top of her head. "I have nightmares."

"You do?"

He nodded, his stubble catching against her hair. "All the time. It's part of the reason I don't sleep much, aside from my superior Time Lord biology."

"I never knew." Guilt suffused her voice.

"I never wanted you to know," he replied quietly. "If you knew you'd want to help, and no one should have to carry the burden of what I dream." They were silent for a moment. "Tell you what, I'll lay with you tonight if you promise that you won't choke me again, and tomorrow we'll go somewhere fun. No running for our lives, no saving the world, just Rose Tyler and the Doctor and a
She thought for a moment, and then nodded. "Deal." She slid off his lap and onto the bed, pulling the thick duvet over her body. He removed his shirt and tie and slipped in next to her. He pulled her close to him and she settled one arm over his stomach and her head on his chest. The soothing rhythm of his hearts beat pounded in her ear, and she was asleep in minutes. The Doctor was surprised to find that he was tired as well. Gradually blackness overcame him. There were no nightmares.

The Doctor fiddled with his bow tie as he waited for Rose to finish changing. As he promised, they were off to a party: the Valusian Ambassador's annual Winter Solstice ball on the planet Paxillon Delta, to be exact. The whole party took place in a giant ice-castle, and unlike ice structures on Earth, Paxillon technology allowed the spaces to be comfortably heated. There would be good food, fantastic architecture, music, dancing, and hopefully no running for their lives. Although, he was wearing his tux, which did not bode well for the outing. In fact, he was beginning to think it was bad luck, after that incident with the Cybermen, and then Professor Lazarus and his doomed experiment. He shook his head. That was coincidence, and nothing more…but no matter how firmly he reminded himself, he couldn't shake a strange sense of foreboding.

"Rose!" he called. "I'm going to take her into the Vortex! We're going to be late, and I don't mean fashionably!"

"Time Machine!" her voice floated through the TARDIS corridors, an echo of his frequent assertion. He chuckled, flipped a few switches, and pulled a lever. All hell broke loose.

The TARDIS shook violently, even more so than when Jack had been clinging to the shell. The floor tipped and bucked and at one point the Doctor was fairly certain it had relocated to the ceiling. He clung to the console, trying to reach the buttons that would bring her out of the Vortex and back into physical being. After three unsuccessful attempts he managed to calm her. Smoke drifted up from the console and he frowned as he knocked on the time rotor.

"What was all that about, eh?" he patted the controls soothingly. "What's your problem?" he asked as he circled the console, pressing buttons and checking for the cause of the alarm.

"Right! Just settle down now," a gruff voice murmured from his right just before he bumped into a man wearing a beige and orange overcoat. They both muttered apologies and continued on in opposite directions. Simultaneously they stopped and turned to face the other, eyes wide.

"What?" the spiky-haired Doctor asked incredulously.

"What?" the strange man in the overcoat and hat echoed.

"What!" They two of them turned towards the third voice. Rose Tyler stood in framed in the doorway to the TARDIS room. She was wearing a long red dress with a daring neckline and slits on either side that stretched to her upper thighs. It was sleeveless, but long red silk opera gloves that cut off just below her shoulders covered her arms. Silver flats covered her feet, practical shoes in case they did have to run for their lives. Her long hair—blonde again—hung around her face in loose waves. Her lips were bright red and opened in an astonished 'o.' The TARDIS turbulence had dislodged her necklace from its usual place beneath her clothing, and her key rested just below her breasts against the top of her stomach.

"I say, who are you and what are you doing on my TARDIS?" the man in the overcoat and hat demanded, looking not at all pleased by the way events were going.
"Your TARDIS?" Rose asked, her eyes wide.

"Yes, my TARDIS!" the man snapped.

"I'm not on your TARDIS!" she snapped back. "I'm on his!" She pointed a finger at the spiky haired Doctor. "And you'd better start explaining!"
There was someone in his TARDIS. Well, two someones, technically. The girl was rather intriguing, and he had to admit that if they weren't in the middle of a temporal crisis that had the potential to destroy the universe he would have enjoyed getting to know her a little better. She was pretty, and sharp. Although her voice had the tendency to become shrill when she was angry, as she apparently was at the moment.

"Oh, brilliant." That was the man. "I mean totally wrong, big emergency, the universe goes 'bang' in five minutes, but," he drew the word out, "brilliant!" The man was obviously an idiot.

"I'm the Doctor," he said, more than a little miffed. "Who are you?"

"Yes you are," the skinny idiot replied, grinning like a loon. Fantastic, mad and dim, just what he needed. "You are the Doctor."

"Yes I am; I'm the Doctor." They were talking in circles. Good Lord, how long was this going on?

"Good for you, Doctor! Good for brilliant old you!" The idiot was still grinning and looking at him rather strangely.

"Is there something wrong with you?" he asked finally.

A short burst of laughter distracted both of them. The girl, and his eyes drifted appreciatively over her—red was definitely a good color on her, had one hand over her mouth as her eyes flicked back and forth between the two of them.

"Rose Tyler, that's rude!" the idiot exclaimed.

"And what, that's your line, mister I'm-rude-but-not-ginger?" she shot back. The idiot grinned even wider, if possible, held out his hand, and wiggled his fingers. She laughed again and crossed the room to lace her fingers with his.

"But really, look at you!" the idiot resumed talking to him. "The hat, the coat, the crickety-cricket stuff the," his smile faded a bit, "stick a'celery. Brave choice, celery. Fair play to you, not a lot of men can carry off a decorative vegetable."

"Shut. Up," he ground out. The idiot frowned at him and the girl's eyebrows shot up. He pulled his hat off of his head and glared at the two of them. "There is something very wrong with my TARDIS and I've got to do something about it very very quickly and it would help, it really would help, if there wasn't some skinny idiot ranting in my face about every single thing that happens to be in front of him!"

The idiot looked like he was trying not to start grinning again. "Oh. Okay, sorry. Doctor." The girl kept looking between them, her expression calculating.
He glanced around, finally taking a moment to review his surroundings, and whirled back toward the idiot. "What have you done to my TARDIS? You've changed the desktop theme, haven't you? What is this," he gestured to the walls and console, "coral?" The idiot grinned again. "It's worse than the leopard skin!"

"Leopard skin?" the girl enquired.

The idiot shrugged. "It was a phase."

"It's ridiculous!" he snapped at them.

"Well, I love it." She ran a hand over the console and smiled at the time rotor. The lights pulsed in response and he looked at her again, noting her easy posture and the shift in the TARDIS's hum.

"She likes you." It was not a question.

The girl shrugged and smiled again. "I like her."

"Who are you?" he asked again, his brow furrowed with confusion and a great deal of irritation.

"I'm Rose, and you're the Doctor," she replied, and then smiled at the idiot. "And so is he."

The idiot swung their clasped hands between them. "Got it in one! Knew there was a reason I brought you on board."

She snorted. "Babbling to yourself not have the same attraction?"

"Oi!" he shoved her shoulder with his. "Cheeky monkey. Rose Tyler, meet me, ooh, five bodies ago?" The idiot leaned closer, studying his face intently. "Yes. Five bodies ago. Me from the past, meet, well, me from the future, and Rose Tyler!"

"I really don't have time for this," he said, and turned back to the console. He reached into one of the pockets lining the interior of his coat and pulled out a pair of half-spectacles. The idiot looked like he was going to start babbling again, but the girl—Rose—elbowed him and he was silent. An alarm blared seemingly from everywhere. "That's an alert! Level five, indicating a temporal collision; it's like two TARDISes have merged, but that's..."

"Impossible?" the skinny idiot supplied.

Rose grinned. "We like impossible."

He looked at them over the rims of his spectacles, really looked this time. He noted their hands, fingers woven together, the seeming disregard for personal space that both of them appeared to have, the casual intimacy of their conversation and the way that the other him's eyes kept straying to her. "Clearly," he said. The idiot's eyes met his own and for a moment all traces of the babbling fool fled. After a split second the mask was back on, grin firmly in place. "You really are me, aren't you."

There was wonder in his voice as he finally admitted what he had suspected from the beginning.

"From a bit further down the line, yep," the older him replied, popping the 'p."

"And you're his assistant?" he asked Rose.

She rolled her eyes. "It wasn't just Sarah Jane, then, you really called them 'assistants?'"

"Well, what was I supposed to call them?" he asked, a mite indignantly.
"I don't know, companion, maybe, or friend?" She gave him a little half-smile. "Is it so difficult to admit that you made friends with inferior species, Doctor?"

He sputtered for a moment. "You've met Sarah Jane?"

The older Doctor waved a hand. "Oh yes, quite by accident too. And you know I can't tell you anything else." His gaze was pointed.

"Maybe not you, but I can." Rose's voice was strangely determined. "You didn't leave her in Croydon, Doctor. You dropped her off in Aberdeen. And then you let her wonder what happened to you for thirty years."

He blinked. "Yes, well. It seems I may have been a little…careless…with my companions." He noted the way his older self's jaw tightened, the way he pulled her closer, the reassuring look she gave him. He touched a nerve, apparently. This was why he disliked running into his past and future selves—there was too much he didn't know, too many buttons he pushed without trying.

A deep-toned gong rang out from somewhere within the TARDIS. He started. "The Cloister bell!"

The older Doctor let go of Rose's hand and bounded to the console. His languorous façade was gone and he was a coiled spring. "That's my cue! Rose, do you remember those buttons I told you never to push?" She nodded. "When I say go, hit them in the order I showed you." He checked the monitor. "Go!" The two of them danced around the console. They moved well, he noted, with an instinctive knowledge of where the other was. Then his eyes widened as he realized exactly what they were doing.

"You'll blow up the TARDIS!" he cried.

"It's the only way!" the older him replied. The vibration he associated with TARDIS travel increased. After a few second he wondered if the idiot was simply going to resonate them out of existence. The time rotor—blue in this TARDIS that was his and not-his, began to glow brighter and brighter until it hurt to look at it.

When the light faded the three of them were in the exact same place as when they started. The TARDIS hummed happily, apparently back to normal.

"Supernova and black hole at the same time," he said in a hushed voice.

"Implosion cancels out the explosion," the other Doctor agreed.

"Matter remains constant." That was Rose. He shot her a surprised look—she grasped the basic mechanics of time travel, something that very few humans achieved, and the TARDIS liked her. His ship seldom made its preferences known with regards to companions. He realized that the two of them were looking at him. He glanced down. The TARDIS grating was visible through his shoes. He was rather transparent.

"Well, it looks like I'm off. It was…interesting…meeting you both." The other Doctor pushed a button on the console and he solidified.

"Before you go, I just wanted to say that I loved being you," the older him said softly as he handed him his hat. "When I first started out I was trying to be old and grumpy and impressive, like you do when you're young. But then I was you, and it was all dashing about and cricket and wearing the brainy specs to make yourself look cleverer." He grinned. "I got that from you." He pulled out a pair of thick-rimmed spectacles and slipped them on. "I just wanted to say, that you were fantastic."
He took his hat from his successor. "I rather think I'll love being you," he commented. "And you're not as bad as most of us are." He tipped his hat to both of them. "To days to come."

"All my love to long ago," the older him replied, and pushed another button.

Rose watched as the older/younger Doctor disappeared. "Do you run into yourself often?" she asked with a cheeky grin.

The Doctor smiled at her. "Sometimes. Not so much anymore, though. Two of us together tends to short out the time differential, and that could rip a hole in the universe." He let go of her hand and bounded around the console. "Now, I promised you a party, didn't I?"

"Hold on a tick." She followed him over, frowning. "How much of this meeting will he remember? Because you didn't know me when I met you in the basement of Henricks, and you definitely said my name several times in front of him."

The Doctor threaded his fingers through hers and traced designs on the back of her hand with his thumb. "What makes you think that?" he asked, smiling softly. "The details will be a bit fuzzy, can't afford to remember too much after all, but didn't you wonder why I came back? I don't ask twice, Rose Tyler. Never have. But I remembered seeing you with me. I remembered being happy with you."

"Oh," she said softly.

"Right!" And the moment was gone. A slightly manic grin split his face as he fiddled with buttons on the console. "One Valusian Ambassador's annual Winter Solstice ball on Paxillon Delta coming up!"

She gripped the railing, grinning back at him. He moved to flip the lever that would send them hurtling toward their destination when the TARDIS heaved. They were tossed to the ground as what appeared to be the prow of a ship thrust itself through the wall of the TARDIS.

"Doctor!" she called as she struggled upright.

He stared at the breached wall of the TARDIS. "What?"

"Doctor, what happened?"

He didn't reply, but he got to his feet, still staring. "What?" Then his eyes moved to the lifesaver lying on the TARDIS grating. The name of the ship was written on the lifesaver in bold letters. It read 'Titanic.' His eyes met Rose's. "What!"
Of Cruises and Christmas

Chapter Notes

Quotes taken from "Voyage of the Damned."

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Quotes taken from "Voyage of the Damned."

The Titanic was in his TARDIS. The Titanic was in his TARDIS. Hold on, the Titanic was in space. They had to be in space; they definitely weren't on Earth, nor were they in the Vortex. He'd set the TARDIS to drift around Earth before they'd run into his previous self and he hadn't had a chance to put in coordinates before the bloody Titanic rammed itself into his ship.

"Doctor!" Rose yelled and he blinked.

"What?" he asked as he turned to face her.

She huffed and crossed her arms in front of her. "Don't go starting that again!"

He scratched the back of his neck and managed to look sheepish. "Right. Sorry. What is it?"

She pointed at the hull of the ship still protruding from the TARDIS wall. "Are you just gonna let it sit there?"

"Right! Yes!" He bounded around the console, pressing buttons and pulling levers. The TARDIS wall slowly reformed, pushing the ship back out. "All better." He patted the console. "Sorry about that, girl."

"We goin' to the party, then?" Rose asked.

He stared at her. "Aren't you the least bit curious?"

"Bout what?" she replied, eyebrow raised.

He gawked. "About why the Titanic is in space, for one thing! About how—" She broke out laughing. He frowned at her for a moment, and then a smile crept over his face. "You're winding me up!"

She grinned at him, her tongue between her teeth. "Go on, then."

He reset the coordinates, and they were off.

They had landed inside a cupboard. Rose shivered as she stepped out of the TARDIS, memories of the last time they had ended up in a storage closet rushing over her. There were no black holes anywhere near Earth, she reminded herself. No chance of the TARDIS falling into the center of a planet, either. But the ship was called the Titanic, and she couldn't help but feel a strange sense of foreboding. The Doctor, still in his tux, held out his hand. She took it, and followed him out.

They were in the middle of a party. Men in tuxedos and women in long, elaborate dresses were everywhere. Huge pine trees decorated with fairy lights and garlands lined the room. Smart looking
men in neat black uniforms stood unobtrusively in corners. Massive crystal chandeliers hung from the vaulted ceiling. The floor and walls were a rich, dark wood. Round tables covered with crisp white linen were scattered around the edges of the room. The center had been left clear and was currently occupied by several people dancing. A woman with a voice like honey sang with a live band on a small stage to the left. Women in tidy black and white uniforms circulated through the room bearing trays of filled glasses and bite-sized morsels. The Doctor snagged two glasses from a passing tray. The young woman who carried it smiled at both of them and wished them a merry Christmas.

"This is posh," Rose commented as she glanced around the room.

The Doctor grinned and then drank from his glass. "Oh, that's good," he said appreciatively. "Whoever the people who run this shindig are, they go all out." He made a face. "Never saying 'shindig' again."

She giggled and took a sip. "What is that?" She held her glass up. The light streamed through the gold tinged liquid and refracted against the cut crystal glass, throwing rainbows of color over her face. Tiny bubbles clung to the sides of the glass and floated to the top.

"Adulasian champagne," the Doctor replied. "Best in the galaxy, well, closer to the universe. It would cost a small fortune to supply a ship this big."

"Attention passengers," a voice boomed over the loudspeaker. "We are now in orbit around Sol 3, also known as Earth. Population: human. The date is December the 24th; ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Christmas!"

The Doctor grinned. "Listen to that, Rose: Christmas!"

She smiled back at him. "No Sycorax this year?"

He shook his head emphatically. "No giant omnivorous spider aliens either!"

She raised an eyebrow. "That sounds like quite a story."

"Oh, it is." He set his empty glass down on a nearby table and held out his hand. "But it's a story for another time." He flashed her a brilliant grin. "Would you care to dance?"

She took his hand and let him pull her into the proper hold for a Waltz. "I think I would." She smiled as they navigated the crush of people on the dance floor. He was an excellent dancer in this body, not that he had been bad before. Swing was all well and good, but hardly appropriate for a fancy party.

He held her close, his mouth just above her ear. "Am I forgiven, then, for not taking you to Paxillon Delta?"

She pretended to consider. "Almost."

He twirled her around, her dress flaring out. "What else do I have to do?"

She smiled at him, her tongue between her teeth as he pulled her back into his arms. "Get me another drink?"

The song ended, and the Doctor left to get each of them another drink. Rose stood by the edge of the dance floor and watched the people around her. They were so alive. The noise washed over her like
a wave in the ocean. People drifted around her as if pulled by currents while she stood and watched them go. She was used to feeling like the still one in Pete's World. It was necessary for her to remain still, to avoid attention, but it was different here. She could breathe and be still, could watch without feeling cut off from everything around her.

"For Tov's sake, watch where you're going!" An angry shout and the tinkle of breaking glass trickled through her awareness. She turned. A man in a fancy tuxedo was yelling at a young woman who was serving. In fact, it was the same woman who wished them merry Christmas earlier.

"I'm sorry sir," she said, her eyes on the floor.

"You'll be sorry when it comes out of your wages, sweetheart" he snapped back. "This jacket is a genuine Earth antique!" He turned his attention to the small silver device in his hand. "Staffed by idiots—no wonder Max Capricorn cruises is falling apart!"

The young woman was picking up bits of glass from the floor. Rose knelt next to her to help.

"I can manage on my own, ma'am," the woman said.

Rose continued to pick up glass. "I never said you couldn't. 'M Rose, by the way."

"Astrid," the girl said finally. "Astrid Peth."

"Happy Christmas, Astrid." She smiled at the other woman. "Don't let Mr. Careless get you down. He's a right tosser."

Astrid's eyes widened. "Yes ma'am. Merry Christmas, ma'am."

"Not ma'am," she corrected. "Just Rose." She rolled her eyes. "It never changes. They think they can treat you however they want, just 'cause you're the help."

Astrid looked at her, taking in the beautiful dress that was without a doubt very expensive. "Surely no one's done that to you, ma'am—Rose."

Rose dropped the last bit of glass she could see on the tray and stood. She held out her hand to help Astrid up. "I've waited tables before, and worked in a shop before that."

"What happened?" Astrid asked, eyes wide and curious. It was like looking at a younger version of herself, back before the universe tried to squeeze out all her innocence.

Rose smiled as her eyes sought out the Doctor. "Met a man, ran away from home, saw the universe. Speak of the devil..."

The Doctor handed her a glass of something purple and fruity smelling. "Making friends, Rose?" he asked and held out his hand to Astrid. "I'm the Doctor."

"Astrid Peth," she said as she shook his hand. She caught the affectionate glance that passed between the Doctor and Rose. He must be the man, she realized.

"Nice to meet you, Astrid Peth." He turned to Rose. "I found out where we are."

"Oh?" She sipped her drink. It was delicious, sweet and warm and just a hint of pear. She wasn't sure where the purple coloring came from, but she didn't really care. It wasn't like she was planning on spilling it on her dress.

"We're currently on a cruise ship named the Titanic—apparently chosen by the head honcho, not
quite sure what possessed him to pick that name—en route from the planet Sto in the Cassavalian belt. That's just about a quarter way across the galaxy from Earth.” He looked back at Astrid. "You're a long way from home."

She shrugged. "I wanted to do it, just once. I used to work in the spaceport diner and watch the ships take off." Her expression turned wistful. "Now I'm across the galaxy, and still waiting tables."

"No shore leave?" Rose asked. They were standing by one of the huge windows that currently overlooked the Earth. It was beautiful from space, perhaps because they were above all of the dirt and grime and pettiness that appeared glaring and immense when up close.

Astrid shook her head. "They couldn't afford the insurance." She paused. "Hang on, how can you not know where you are?"

"We're not, strictly speaking, on the guest list," the Doctor confided, mirth shining from his eyes.

"How did you get on board?" She glanced back and forth between them.

"Stowaways," Rose replied with a grin.

"I've got this ship," the Doctor supplied. "I was just rebuilding her and I didn't put the shields up. Bumped into the Titanic, and thought what the hell, I promised Rose a party, why not this one?"

"You travel a lot, then?" She was still trying to decide what to do with them. They were nice, very nice actually, but she would get sacked if she didn't let the Steward know about two unauthorized passengers. Then again…she didn't much like this job anyway.

"Oh, all the time. We're always knocking about, usually for fun, but it never seems to go according to plan." A shadow flitted across his face so quickly that Astrid couldn't be sure that it wasn't a trick of the light.

Rose snorted. "Plan? What's that?"

The Doctor looked injured. "Oi! I'm brilliant at planning."

"You're brilliant at improvising," she corrected, but her smile took the bite out of her words.

"But really," the Doctor continued, "another sky, another sun. The whole universe is teeming with life. Why stand still when there's all that life out there?" Rose nodded her agreement, her eyes on the planet below.

There was something magnetic about him, she realized, something that shone through with blinding intensity when he spoke like that. He was talking to her, but he was looking at Rose. If what she said was true, then he knew about alien skies. "I should report you," Astrid said finally.

They looked at her. "Go on, then," the Doctor replied.

She grinned. "There's hundreds of people on this ship, what's two more?" She looked down at the tray of broken glass she still held. "Best get this cleaned up. I'll see you around."

They drifted over to one of the immaculate tables. A couple was all ready sitting there, plates of food from the buffet scattered around them. They were both a bit on the large side, and were wearing what looked like an approximation of fancy cowboy clothes. At the next table over a group of passengers were having trouble controlling their apparent amusement at the couple's appearance. He
felt Rose's hand grip his own tighter and the corner of his mouth twitched. She was always looking to defend the underdog, his Rose. It was one of the things he loved about her. She had a heart that demanded equality for everyone and enough compassion to, well, to love him, which took some doing. He knew that he could be prickly and distant and downright rude, but she weathered his manic mood changes with the solidity of a mountain. Perhaps a volcano, given her own ability to explode when he did or said something that crossed the invisible line of what she would tolerate.

He plopped down in a seat next to the couple and Rose followed a bit more gracefully. The woman glanced at the people who were laughing loudly. The edges of her mouth pulled down in a half-frown.

"Just ignore them," the man told her.

"Something's tickled them," the Doctor commented. Rose shot them a glare.

The woman sighed. "They told us it was fancy dress." She motioned to her clothing. It wasn't a bad dress, if one was heading to a western-themed party. "Very funny, I'm sure."

The man laid a hand on her arm. "They're just picking on us because we haven't paid." He turned to the other two. "We won our tickets in a competition!"

The woman beamed. "I had to name the five husbands of Joofie Crystalle, in 'By the Light of the Asteroid.'" She cocked her head to the side. "Do you ever watch 'By the Light of the Asteroid'?"

"Is that the one with the twins?" Rose broken in. The woman nodded happily. The Doctor looked confused. "I tried to get you to watch it with me," she reminded him, "but you insisted that the TARDIS needed fixing, and I know for a fact she didn't."

"Oh, right. You humans and your telly."

She shoved him playfully. "Don't think I didn't catch you watching 'EastEnders.'"

He looked shocked. "I would never!"

She sighed. "I did miss it when I was gone. No intergalactic programs on Pete's World."

"I can come up with something," the Doctor replied confidently. "Good at tinkering, me."

"Anyway," the man continued. "We're not good enough for that lot." He motioned over his shoulder. "They think we should be in steerage!"

The Doctor glanced to the next table. "Well, we can't have that," he said with a mischievous smile. He made a show of crossing his arms on the table. The sonic screwdriver was in his left hand, pointed at the bottle of champagne one of the servers had just placed on the snobs' table. It buzzed softly as he pressed the button. A loud 'pop' followed by a burst of champagne exploded from behind him. The gawkers shrieked as they tried to close the bottle. When that failed, they stormed from the room, dripping wet.

Rose grinned at him.

"Did—did you do that?" the woman asked, incredulous.

The Doctor shrugged. "Maybe."

The man clapped softly as they both chuckled. "We like you two!" the woman said brightly.
"We do. I'm Morvin Van Hoff," the man said and extended his hand. "And this is my good woman Foon."

The Doctor and Rose took the proffered hands. "I'm the Doctor," he said, "and this is Rose."

She smiled at them. "Pleased to meet you Morvin and Foon."

"I'm going to need a Doctor time I've finished with that buffet," Foon quipped. "Have a buffalo wing. They must be enormous, these buffalo. So many wings."

Rose hid a smile behind her hand as the Doctor snagged. He hardly ever met a food he didn't like, especially finger food.

A chime rang through the room. "Attention please," a voice boomed over the loudspeaker. "Shore leave tickets red 6-7 are now activated."

"Red 6-7?" Foon asked her husband, he nodded. "That's us!" The each pulled slips of laminated red paper from their pockets. "Are you red 6-7 as well?" she asked the Doctor and Rose.

The Doctor grinned and set down the wing he'd been gnawing on. "Might as well be!"

"Come on then!" Morvin called. "We're going to Earth!" The Doctor grabbed Rose's hand and they followed their new friends to a small podium surrounded by a crowd of partygoers and an older man holding up a red sign. She grinned, her tongue between her teeth. They'd been here for almost an hour, and no sign of trouble. It had to be a record.

The Doctor paused, and Rose followed his gaze. Astrid was standing near the booth. He frowned.

"We should bring her with," Rose said. "You've got the psychic paper, yeah?"

He nodded. "Of course! But they won't buy 'plus two.'"

She gave him a cheeky grin and reached into the small purse that hung from a thin chain over her shoulder. She rummaged around for a moment before she found what she was looking for, and held it in front of him. His eyes widened.

"Where did you get that?" he asked. She was holding his spare psychic paper.

She kept grinning. "TARDIS gave it to me. I think she likes me better."

He groaned. "Great, now you're ganging up on me. Women!" He grabbed Astrid's hand and pulled her along with them. Rose kept her hand near her purse. She didn't tell him about her Dimension Cannon, tucked safely inside, or the two guns she kept on her at all times. It was easier that way. They would talk about it eventually, but not now. Now she wanted to enjoy herself.

"Where are we going?" Astrid asked breathlessly. The Doctor and Rose flashed their psychic paper and received three teleport bracelets. Rose handed one to Astrid, who looked at them with wide eyes.

"I'll get sacked!" she whispered.

"Brand new sky," the Doctor reminded her. She worried her bottom lip with her teeth as she looked from the bracelet to the tray of drinks she left sitting on the table.

"We'll give you a ride, anywhere you want to go if they catch you," Rose promised.

"Really?" Astrid was incredulous.
"Really," the Doctor confirmed.

She slipped the bracelet on. "All right then, to Earth!"

The old man was talking again. "I'm Mr. Copper, the ship's historian, and I shall be taking you to old London town in the country of U.K., ruled over by Good King Wenceslas. Now, human beings worship the great god Santa, a creature with fearsome claws, and his wife Mary. And every Christmas eve the people of U.K. go to war with the country of Turkey. They then eat the Turkey people for Christmas dinner, like savages."

Rose was gaping at the man. This is what other planets believed about the Earth? She'd never heard anything so ridiculous. The Doctor's eyebrows had risen so high they looked like they were about to disappear into his hairline.

"Excuse me," he called. "Sorry, sorry. But, um, where did you get all this from? He scratched his neck, trying to look the part of fascinated tourist.

The old man stood a little straighter at the challenge. "I have a first-class degree in Earthonomics," he replied. "Now standby, we'll be going down any minute."

"And me! And me!" A high-pitched voice rang out from the vicinity of her knees. Rose looked down as a small, spiky, red alien made his way to the front of the crowd. He waved his ticket above his head. "Red 6-7!"

Mr. Copper looked a bit startled, but he recovered quickly. "Well, take a bracelet please sir."

If possible, the Doctor's eyebrows went even higher. Rose frowned. There was no way that this one would blend in. The others looked human, maybe they were time travelers or something, but he was definitely alien. "Hold on, what was your name?"

"Bannakaffalata," the alien replied.

"Okay, Bannakaffalata," the Doctor said, glancing from him to Mr. Copper. "It's Christmas eve down there! Late night shopping, tons of people! He's like a talking conker." The alien glared at him. "No offense, but you'll start a riot! The streets are going to be packed with shoppers and parties and people—"

A blue light filled her vision and a strange crackling sound roared in her ears. When the light cleared they were standing in the middle of a street. An empty street.

"Oh," the Doctor said, clearly surprised.

Rose tugged on his sleeve. The others were caught up in what Mr. Copper was saying. "Doctor, where is everyone?" She glanced around, frowning. "This isn't right. This isn't right at all."
The Doctor spun on the spot, staring at the street around them. The few shops that were open stood empty. Rose was right. This was wrong, wrong on so many levels. It was London; it should have been full to bursting! Mr. Copper was droning on about spending money and the local delicacy—beef—but he seemed to find their situation not at all disturbing.

"It should be full," he murmured to Rose and Astrid. "It should be busy. You're right, Rose. Something's wrong."

Astrid, however, was gazing around the empty street like it was something out of a fairy tale. "But it's beautiful," she said in a breathy voice, her eyes shining.

Rose looked at her like she'd gone mad. "Really? S'just a street. The pyramids are beautiful, and New Zealand, but here?"

"It's a different planet," Astrid said earnestly as she took a hesitant step forward. "I'm standing on a different planet! There's concrete and—and shops! Real alien shops!"

The Doctor was grinning now, and Rose couldn't help but smile as well. Astrid's joy was infectious. "Is this how it felt watching me?" she asked him softly.

He squeezed her hand. "Sometimes you have to see a place through someone else's eyes to appreciate it."

"No stars in the sky," Astrid noted as she gazed up.

"Too much light," the Doctor replied. "It's better out in the countryside. Remember Scotland, Rose?"

She nodded. "Beautiful stars. Of course, it was in the middle of nowhere, during the Victorian ages. Far less electricity around then."

Astrid hugged the Doctor, and then Rose. "This is amazing! Thank you!"

Rose laughed. "You're welcome." She looked around. "I was born here, lived the first 19 years of my life in this city." She was quiet for a moment. "Never thought I'd make it back."

The Doctor squeezed her hand and smiled at her. She smiled back. "Well then, let's have a look." He pulled Rose over to a nearby newsstand and Astrid followed. He flashed the newsagent, an older gentleman who was bundled up against the cold, one of his manic grins. "Hello there! Obvious question—where is everyone?"

The man looked at him oddly. "Scared."

Rose frowned. "Scared? Of what?"

"Where've you been living?" he asked incredulously.
"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," she muttered.

"London, at Christmas," he continued, "it's not safe!"

"Why?" the Doctor broke in.

The old man pulled his eyebrows together in a frown and gestured at the sky. "Well, it's them up above! Look," he said slowly, as if he was talking to an idiot. "Christmas before last we had that big bloody spaceship, everyone standing on the roof. Ring any bells?" The Doctor and Rose kept their faces carefully blank. The old man sighed and motioned to the telly. An image of something that looked like a Christmas star, but definitely wasn't, appeared. Rose felt the Doctor's arm tighten around her. "Then last year that Christmas star electrocuting all over the place, draining the Thames. And this year, Lord knows what, so everybody's scarpered—gone to the country—all except me and her majesty." He puffed out his chest. "May God bless her," he said and saluted.

The Doctor smiled. "Well, I think that this year her majesty has the right of it. As far as I know, this year there's nothing to worry about." Blue light flooded his vision, and the familiar crackling roar filled his ears.

The Doctor was not amused. "I was in mid-sentence!" he protested when they reappeared on the Titanic. Rose couldn't help but giggle. Of course he wasn't worried about the newsagent, he was indignant because someone cut him off when he was talking.

Mr. Copper looked flustered as he stepped down from the podium. "Yes, I'm sorry about that. There, uh, was a bit of a problem." He walked in front of the group as two Stewards came over. "If I could have your bracelets back?" Astrid slipped behind the Doctor and Rose when she caught sight of the Stewards. She pulled her bracelet off and passed it to the Doctor.

"Apologies, ladies and gentlemen and Bannakaffalata," one of the Stewards said. "We seem to have suffered a power fluctuation. If you'd like to return to the festivities, and on behalf of Max Capricorn Cruiseliners free drinks will be provided." The others seemed to find this offer acceptable. Rose knew, however, that the Doctor would not be distracted.

"What kind of power fluctuation?" he asked as he handed the Steward their bracelets. However, the Stewards refused to tell him, citing routine maintenance and offering several standard reassurances. He frowned as they walked back to the main ballroom. Astrid was already gone, once again circulating the room bearing a full tray.

"Out with it," Rose said finally.

The Doctor looked at her. "What?"

She raised an eyebrow. "You're thinking so loudly it hurts." He blinked at her. She rolled her eyes. "It's a figure of speech Doctor. Now spill!"

He ran a hand through his hair. "Ships like these have systems that are almost totally independent of each other," he began. "It keeps them efficient and allows them to continue functioning if one system is damaged. A power drain that could affect the teleports without beginning in that department would have to be massive. It certainly wouldn't be anything that 'routine maintenance' could handle."

"So, you're saying that there's trouble," she supplied.

He looked a bit sheepish. "I'm saying there could be." He sighed. "I'm sorry, Rose. I wanted this to be a chance for the both of us to relax. After the past year—"
She touched his lips lightly with her finger, just enough to silence him. "It's alright, Doctor. 'S not your fault." She grinned. "Besides, it wouldn't feel right if we didn't end up running for our lives."

Morvin and Foon were back at their table, enjoying the free drinks and buffet. Bannakaffalata was dancing with an attractive ginger woman, and Rose and the Doctor were standing near one of the huge windows overlooking the Earth. Astrid caught their eye as she moved through the room, and smiled at them. They waved at her.

Rose rolled her eyes as the Doctor glanced, for the tenth time in as many minutes, at one of the framed screens playing an advertisement for Max Capricorn Cruiseliners. He was restraining himself for her sake, she knew. It was sweet, the way he was trying so hard to make this trip different from the others, but she meant what she said earlier. She had no illusions that they would be able to sit back and let events unfold in front of them. The Doctor wasn't built like that, and even if he was, she sure as hell wasn't.

"Go on, then," she said, and bumped his shoulder with her own. He shot her a grateful look, slipped on his spectacles, and examined the screen. She stood next to him keeping watch. He frowned, and pulled out the sonic screwdriver. A few buzzes and he had the screen open. He fiddled with the internal mechanisms for a moment. They were relatively simple. After all, it was a cruise ship, not a military vessel. He managed to switch off the advertisement and link the screen to the central computer. He pushed it closed. His eyes widened as he studied the readings that danced across the screen in front of him.

On the bridge, Midshipman Alonzo Frame assumed his position next to the captain. It was a little odd, the way he'd sent everyone else away and only allowed Alonzo to stay once he had quoted regulations, but Alonzo figured that the captain was being kind. He felt out of place, being the new man on deck. The other crew, at least the proper crew—Stewards didn't count, were all older men with years of experience. This voyage was his first, and he wanted to prove that he was a capable sailor.

The screen in front of him beeped insistently. "Picking up a meteoroid shower portside, bearing West 56, North 2, sir."

The captain did not take his eyes off the window in front of him. "Fairly standard in this part of space—miles away."

"We could probably see it, sir," he said, and raised the binoculars to his eyes. Sure enough, three meteoroids were hurtling through space parallel with the ship. They continued on for a few moments, and then they changed course. He frowned. Meteoroids didn't behave like that—they didn't suddenly change direction like birds. He lowered the binoculars and glanced back at the captain, who was pushing buttons on the screen in front of the wheel. "That's a bid odd, sir—the meteoroids have changed course." His tone became brisk as he considered his own screen. "Still, we can put the shields up to maximum, just in case."

The captain's voice cut through the air. "As you were, midshipman."

He stared at the captain. "But sir, the meteoroids are on a course that's perpendicular to the Titanic!"

"I said, as you were!" the captain snapped back. "Or do I need to have you sent to the brig for insubordination?"

A faint alarm began to sound. Alonzo stared at the captain. "You've magnetized the hull, sir," he said
quietly, unwilling to believe what was happening. "It's drawing the meteors in. I take it that's deliberate." He paused, still hoping that he was wrong. "Bit of a light show for the guests?" The captain did not respond. Alonzo closed his eyes. It was his first voyage. He was a midshipman and the man in front of him was, well, the captain.

"Something like that," the older man finally responded. Alonzo did not believe him.

"Oh no," the Doctor breathed. His eyes were wide, very wide, as he glanced between the screen and the window. There was no mistake.

"What is it?" Rose asked. She shifted closer to him. She knew that tone; she'd heard it hundreds of times while she traveled with him.

He threw a regretful look over his shoulder at her. "Trouble."

The whistle of the com almost made Alonzo jump out of his skin.

"Is that the bridge? I need to talk to the captain!" a man's voice, low and intense burst over the speakers. "You've got a meteoroid storm coming in West 0 by North 2."

The captain strode to the com before Alonzo could. "Who is this?" he asked harshly.

"Never mind that!" the voice replied. "Your shields are down! Check your scanners, captain. You've got meteors on a collision course with the ship and no shields!" Alonzo heard a woman gasp.

"You have no authorization," the captain said. "You will surrender the coms at once!"

"Bugger authorization!" a woman, probably the one who gasped, said in significantly more strident tones than the man. "They'll destroy the ship! They'll kill all these people!"

"Just look starboard!" it was the man again.

The Doctor groaned as two Stewards pulled him away from the coms. Rose dodged back and managed to escape their notice, but he could tell from the thin line of her lips that she wasn't going to stay behind. He jerked his head toward the stage, hoping that she would catch his drift.

"You've got a rockstorm heading for the ship," he grated out, trying to distract them so Rose would have enough time to warn the others. "And the shields are down!" The Stewards didn't see Rose, but they also seemed to be ignoring him.

She darted past Morvin and Foon, still sitting at their table and almost ran into Astrid in her haste to get to the small stage that was pressed against one edge of the room. She raced up the steps and grabbed the microphone away from the singer. "Everyone, listen! This is an emergency! Get to the life—" A Steward materialized next to her and covered her mouth with his hand. She contemplated biting him, but realized that he was far stronger than she was. The Steward pulled her off the stage and dragged her behind the other two who were minding the Doctor.

"It was a long shot," he called back to her. She nodded and the Steward finally released her mouth.

"Had to try," she replied.

Alonzo stared at the gun in the captain's hands: the gun that was aimed in his direction. "He's right,
"Sir. The shields have been taken offline and if we don't get them back up everyone on this ship will die."

"They promised me old men," the captain said, a strange, distant look on his face. "Not boys. Seadogs—men who'd had their time on the crew."

"I'm sorry, sir?" Alonzo was almost afraid to ask. The whole world was going mad. "But the passengers—"

"I'm dying already," the captain responded. "Six months to live, and they promised me so much money—for my family."

Alonzo straightened. He took a deep breath. "It's my duty, sir." Then he dove for the controls. The captain was faster. The sharp retort of gunfire sounded, and Alonzo felt white-hot pain streak through his middle. He landed in a heap on the floor. The captain replaced the gun in its holster and stared out the front window, his face once again blank.

"Look out the windows!" the Doctor shouted at one of the passengers as the Stewards dragged him and Rose away. Astrid stared at them, and then dropped her tray on the table and followed. Morvin and Foon pushed away from their table almost in the same moment. Bannakaffalata hesitated, before he too took up the chase.

"If you don't believe me," the Doctor said, trying once more to reason with his captors, "then check the shields yourself!"

"Listen to him!" Rose cried. "He knows what he's talking about! And even if we're wrong, it's better to be sure, yeah? If those rocks hit the ship they'll rip it apart!"

"Sir, I can vouch for him!" Astrid was by their side, pleading with the one of the Stewards.

"He's just had too much to drink," Morvin said from the other side, Foon close behind. The Stewards were deaf or indifferent. They pulled Rose and the Doctor out of the main rooms and into the bowels of the ship, Astrid, Foon, Morvin, and Bannakaffalata trailing behind them.

Back in the ballroom, Rickston Slade watched as a meatball-sized rock crashed through one of the large windows overlooking the Earth. It rolled to a stop on the carpet, leaving a burnt trail behind it. He frowned.

"Oxygen membrane holding," the framed screen in front of him said.

He turned to one of the nearby Angelic Host. They were a little creepy, he had to admit, but they were only robots. "You there, what's going on?"

"Information," the Host responded in the smug way that only a robot could manage. "You are all going to die." He stared at it, frozen in horror.

"The shields are down," the Doctor said for what seemed like the millionth time. "We're going to get hit!" The Stewards still refused to listen. He wasn't sure if the thought he was mad, or they just didn't care. If only he could make them understand! Images from his experience on the original Titanic flashed through his mind. He could prevent this, if only the stubborn fools would listen! Did he have a giant sign on his forehead that told people not to listen to him? Why else would everyone he met decide that he had nothing important to say? The others were all talking at once, trying to get the men
holding him and Rose to stop, to listen, to let them go.

"Oi, Steward!" a man's voice cut through the babble. The Doctor twisted around to see the man he'd
told to check the windows standing behind them. Even the Stewards turned to look. "I'm telling you,
the shields are down!"

"Listen to him!" The Doctor urged. For the first time he saw doubt in the eyes of his captors.

Then the world exploded around them. Shocks ran through the ship and the Doctor knew that they
were out of time. He was always out of time, it seemed, and it was ridiculous, because he was a Time
Lord. Time didn't control him, couldn't touch him, and yet he was at its mercy even more than an
ordinary human being.

The Stewards released him, trying desperately to stay upright. The Doctor couldn't even tell which
way was up as the ship tossed and turned beneath him. He grabbed Rose and clung to her, trying to
shield her body with his. He was vaguely aware of the others shouting as sparks flew around them.
The ship bucked and he was thrown into the machinery that lined the hallway. He bit back a curse
and tasted blood in his mouth. Rose screamed as fire leapt up in front of them.

A second impact rocked the ship even more, if possible, and it was closely followed by a third. The
tremors threw them around like rag dolls, into each other and the unforgiving machinery and metal
floors of the corridor. After what seemed like an eternity the ship shuddered, and then stilled. The
Doctor cautiously got to his feet, and helped Rose rise. He could feel bruises forming on his back
and sides. He touched his face and felt where his lip had split. It throbbed unpleasantly.

"Are you all right?" he asked Rose.

She nodded and winced, her hand going to her stomach. "I'll feel it tomorrow, that's for sure."

He pulled the sonic screwdriver out and scanned her. "No sign of internal bleeding." The relief was
plain in his voice. "Bad name for a ship," he murmured to her before turning to the others. "Either
that or this suit is really unlucky."

"Don't I know it," she replied. Her eyes drifted down and she knelt. One of the Stewards was
trapped under a sheet of metal. She checked for a pulse mechanically. She was not surprised when
she found none. Rose looked up at the Doctor, and shook her head.

The remaining Steward paled, but pulled himself together. He tried to apologize, to fall back on
corporate training, but the others were having none of it. They crowded around him yelling about
how much they paid for their tickets and demanding explanations; all of them except for Astrid, who
stood by the side watching the Doctor, who was trying—unsuccessfully—to get a word in edgewise.

"Quiet!" the Steward finally yelled. The chatter died away as the other stared at him. "I would point
out," he continued, "that we're very much alive."

Astrid motioned for the Doctor to go to Mr. Copper, who was sitting on the floor looking a bit dazed.
A small gash on his skull dripped blood down the side of his face. The Doctor, for once acting like
an actual doctor, checked his pupils and scanned him with the sonic screwdriver.

"Just a bump on the head," he assured Astrid. "Nothing to worry about. Well, not compared with
what just happened."

The Steward waited until the examination was completed before he addressed them again. "If you
could all stay here while I ascertain the exact nature of the—situation." He moved to one of the doors
leading off the hallway.

The Doctor glanced up. His eyes widened as he pushed away from Mr. Copper. "Don't open it!"

He was too late. The door flew open and out into space. The Steward followed. Rose clung to the walls as the air was sucked into the vacuum beyond. It tore at her as it passed, trying to suck them all into the emptiness of space beyond. Someone screamed—it sounded like Foon. She hoped that the others could hold on. The Doctor was moving, throwing himself at the wall where Bannakaffalata clung to something square and metal.

He cried out as he hit a particularly sharp projection.

"Doctor!" Rose yelled. He waved at her and continued on his way. He pulled the sonic out of his pocket and buzzed it at a keypad next to Bannakaffalata. Suddenly, the suction stopped.

"Oxygen shield stabilized," the computer said.

He turned to the others. "Everyone all right?" No one answered. "Rose!" She nodded. "Astrid?"

"Yes."

"Foon, Morvin, Mr. Copper, Bannakaffalata?" They all answered in the affirmative. He glanced at the unfamiliar man and frowned. "And you, what was your name again?"

"Rickston Slade," he responded. Rose recognized him as the man who ran into Astrid earlier, and then promptly blamed it on her.

"You all right?" the Doctor asked.

Rickston sneered. "No thanks to that idiot."

"The Steward just died!" Astrid protested.

"Then he's a dead idiot," he responded. Rose fought the urge to slap him across the face. Apparently Astrid was having similar thoughts, as she moved towards him. The Doctor came between the two.

"Calm down, everyone," he said sternly. Just—stay still, all of you." He walked over to the door, now protected by the oxygen shield. Rose followed. They stood for a moment in silence, staring out at the Earth.

"That wasn't an accident," she said finally.

He nodded. His jaw clenched as bodies floated into view among the wreckage. It was the same, exactly the same, except that Time had been in flux. Unlike the original incident, this Titanic hadn't been a fixed point in Time. No one needed to die. He closed his eyes briefly, and then turned to Rose. "The TARDIS is in reception. We need to get everyone up there." Her eyes widened as she looked beyond him. He frowned. "What?" She pointed to the hole in the ship. He turned, just in time to see the TARDIS float by. "Oh." His face fell.

"What is it?" Astrid asked from behind them. "What happened? Why were the shields down?"

The Doctor took a deep breath, but Rose beat him to it. "We think it was on purpose," she said quietly. "Sabotage. And we have this ship—but it's been set adrift."

"And if that happens, it's programmed to lock onto the nearest center of gravity," the Doctor supplied. "In this case, the Earth."
"So we're stranded," Astrid said slowly, white all around her irises. "We're stranded and the ship is broken.

"We're alive," the Doctor reminded her. "Focus on that. And we will get you out of here. All of you."

She bit her lip, but nodded. Rose smiled at her encouragingly. "We do this kind of stuff all the time," she assured the other woman. "We're pretty good at fixing things."

"Deck 22 to the bridge," a man's voice—the same man from earlier—crackled over the coms. Alonzo groaned and pulled himself upright, one hand pressed against his side as he attempted to staunch the blood trickling from the bullet's entrance. "Deck 22 to the bridge, is anyone there?"

He fumbled for the button, his hand slick with blood. "This is the bridge."

"Hello sailor! Good to hear you. What's the situation up there?"

Rose helped Astrid clean the cut on Mr. Copper's forehead while the Doctor questioned the man on the other end of the coms. The others were standing nearby, finally quiet. Food leaned against Morvin and she smiled at the two of them. Rickston sat apart, of course, still grumbling about how much money he paid for his ticket. Her mouth twisted into a frown. She had met plenty of people like him in Pete's World, and she disliked them intensely.

"So, you two really do this all the time?" Astrid asked.

Rose shrugged. "Not intentionally, but it seems like wherever the Doctor goes, trouble follows." Her eyes wandered back to him and the corners of her mouth tugged upward. His hair was almost standing on end and he clutched at it with one hand, an expression of intense concentration on his face. He pushed away from the coms and joined Rose and Astrid.

"The engines are nuclear storm drives," he said quietly, "and they're cycling down. The minute they go out we lose orbit. And if this ship hits the Earth..."

Rose's eyes widened. "That would be worse than a nuclear bomb."

The Doctor nodded. "Much worse. Our friend on the bridge—sailor by the name of Midshipman Frame—is going to fire up the containment field and feed it back into the core. That should buy us some time."

"What are you going to do?" Astrid asked. The others were staring at the Doctor.

He returned their gaze. His face was set, his eyes blazing. "First thing's first. One: we're going to climb through this ship. 'B'—no, Two: We're going to reach the bridge. Three, or 'C,' we're going to save the Titanic, and Four, or 'D,' or that little 'iv' that goes in brackets in footnotes—why. Now come on."

Rickston, of course, objected. "Hang on a minute, who put you in charge? And who are you anyway?"

The Doctor went very still in the way that no human and very very few aliens could ever manage. When he turned Rose had to fight the urge to grin. The considerate lover, the enthusiastic child, the babbling fool were all gone. In their place stood the Doctor, the Time Lord. Something about his face, his bearing changed and command radiated from him. The weight of his years seemed to settle
around them and as he spoke even his voice changed.

"I'm the Doctor. I'm a Time Lord. I'm from the planet Gallifrey in the constellation of Kasterborous. I am 903 years old and I am the man who is going to save your lives and all six billion people on the planet below." He paused, one eyebrow raised. The silence was palpable. "Do you have a problem with that?"

Rickston blanched. "No," he said finally.

"In that case," the Doctor continued. "Allons-y!"
It was slow, but relatively easy going until they reached the stairwell. The Doctor shoved the door open roughly and they followed him into the narrow room. Twisted metal poles and sheeting were stacked haphazardly in their way. Sparks shot from the walls and steam poured from a shattered pipe.

"Rather ironic," Mr. Copper said as they wound their way up the stairs. "This is very much in the spirit of Christmas. It's a festival of violence," he went on. "They say that human beings only survive depending on whether they've been good or bad. It's barbaric!"

Rose threw an exasperated look over her shoulder. "That's not what Christmas is about at all! It's a time of peace and thanksgiving and—" the Doctor caught her eye. She growled. "Oh, who am I kidding? Our Christmases are always like this."

"Even in Pete's world?" he asked.

She rolled her eyes. "Especially in Pete's world." The Doctor pulled a sheet of grating out of the way and stopped. Rose almost ran into him. "What is it?"

"We've got a Host!" the Doctor replied. "Strength of ten, they have. If we can mend it we can use it to clear away the rubble."

"We can do robotics," Morvin called from behind them, "both of us."

"We work at the milk market back on Sto—it's all robotic staff!" Foon added.

"See if you can get it working." The Doctor turned to Rose and Astrid. "Let's have a look."

They were halfway up the stairwell when they hit a snag. Astrid sighed as she stared at the pile of twisted metal. "It's blocked," she called to the Doctor and Rose.

"So what do we do?" the Doctor asked.

Astrid straightened a bit. "We shift it."

Rose grinned. "That's the spirit."

"Rickston, Mr. Copper, and you, Bannakaffalata—" he frowned. "Can I call you Banna? It'll save time."

The spiky red alien shook his head. "No! Bannakaffalata."

The Doctor made a face. Rose nudged his ribs with her elbow. "Remember how much you liked Jack calling you 'Doc,'" she murmured.

"All right then, Bannakaffalata, there's a gap in the middle." He pointed to the blockage. "See if you
"Easy!" The alien stated as he moved forward. "Good!" A tremor rocked the ship. Metal groaned and creaked as it shifted. Sparks and steam danced around them. Rose clutched the Doctor's arm and braced herself against the wall.

"This whole thing could come crashing down any minute!" Rickston yelled from behind them.

The Doctor glared at him. "Did you get that message, Rickston?"

The other man blinked. "What message?"

"Shut up!" the Doctor growled.

"Bannakaffalata—made it!" the alien's voice drifted down.

"I'm small," Astrid volunteered. "I can fit."

"Careful," the Doctor said as she squeezed into the opening.

"I'm fine!" she called back.

"You next, Rose."

"And when are you going through?" Rose quirked an eyebrow at him.

"I've got to see if I can help the Van Hoffs with that Host," he replied. "We might need it later." She nodded. "I'll be all right." He grinned at her. "More lives than a cat, me."

She frowned. "If you get yourself regenerated I will be very cross."

He pressed a quick kiss to her lips. "Then I'll do my best not to. Now, off you go!"

Astrid slid out on the other side of the blockage. She paused for a moment to catch her breath. It was tight going in there. "I can clear it from this side!" she called to the others. "Just tell me if it starts moving!"

"Rose is coming!" the Doctor replied. "Wait until she gets there!"

Astrid backed away, and almost tripped over Bannakaffalata, who was lying on his back on the floor. "Oh! Bannakaffalata, what's wrong?" The alien shushed her. "What is it?"

He looked away. "Can't say. Ashamed."

She frowned and knelt beside him. "Ashamed? Of what?" He pulled his shirt up, exposing a metal panel over his chest. Astrid's eyes widened. "You're a cyborg?"


"But everything's changed now." She placed a comforting hand on his arm. "Cyborgs are getting equal rights. They passed a law—you can even get married."

He smiled at her. "Marry you?"

Astrid smiled back. "Well, you can buy me a drink first." She reached under his shirt and began pressing buttons. "Come on, let's recharge you." The chest plate beeped at her. She pulled his shirt
back down. "Just stay there for a moment."

"Tell no one," he asked. She nodded.

"I promise."

A blonde head appeared, followed by a woman's body wrapped in a red dress. Rose pulled herself out of the rubble and smiled at the both of them. "Everything all right?"

Astrid glanced at Bannakaffalata and grinned. "I think we just got engaged."

Rose laughed. "Good for you, now let's start on this thing, shall we?"

"How are Mr. and Mrs. Fatso gonna get through that gap?" Rickston asked nastily.

"We make the gap bigger," the Doctor snapped as he pulled bits of metal away from the blockage, "so start!"

"Almost done!" Morvin called from his position with Foon at the midpoint of the staircase.

"Good, good, good!" the Doctor responded. They'd managed to clear away a sizable bit of rubble, but it was still tight going. He pulled out the sonic and buzzed the coms unit built into the wall. "Mr. Frame, how's things?"

"Doctor, I've got life signs all over the ship, but they're going out one by one!" The man sounded frantic. The Doctor frowned.

"Are they losing air?" If the oxygen shield was going they were all in danger.

"No," the reply came. "One of them said something about the Host. It's something to do with the Host."

The Doctor pushed himself away from the coms unit and bolted down the stairs, almost toppling Mr. Copper over in his haste to get to the Van Hoffs.

"It's working!" Morvin's shout was exultant but it sent chills down the Doctor's spine.

"Information," the Host said. "Kill. Kill. Kill." It stretched out its hands and grasped Morvin around the throat.

"Turn it off!" the Doctor shouted.

Foon was already trying to adjust something in the computer. "It's not working!" she screamed.

The Doctor swung over the railing and landed next to them. "Go!" Foon dashed up the stairs as he aimed the sonic at the Host. Nothing. "Can't stop it!" He ground out. "Double-deadlock!"

"Kill. Kill. Kill," the Host repeated in an endless loop. The Doctor stowed the sonic in his jacket pocket, grasped the Host's hands, and pulled them apart. A human would never have managed it, but he was a Time Lord, and no matter how skinny he looked, he was stronger than the strongest human.

"Get upstairs!" he ground out. Morvin ran.

"Doctor!" Rose's voice drifted down.
The Doctor backed away and the host followed. "Rickston!" he yelled over his shoulder. "Get them through!"

The man stuck his head down. "No chance!" He turned, and wiggled into the blockage.

Foon stared at the mass of twisted metal. "I'll never get through there!"

Mr. Copper took her hand. "Yes you will, let me help you, my dear."

The Doctor paused at the coms momentarily. The Host was having a bit of difficulty navigating the stairs, but it was still coming. "It's the host!" he yelled into the coms. "They've gone berserk! Are you safe up there?" Then the robot was behind him, and he ran.

"I'm stuck!" Foon wailed. Rickston paced as Mr. Copper and Rose tried to help her.

"Come on," Mr. Copper said soothingly, "you can do it!"

"Push, Foon!" Rose ordered.

The structure shifted. Mr. Copper grabbed a pipe and pushed it up. Foon slid out with a gasp and staggered away. The metal groaned and protested as Mr. Copper struggled to keep it up. "Rickston, Vot dammit, help me!"

"No way!"

Rose turned on him. "You bloody useless coward!" she screamed. Her eyes were wide and dangerous, and within their depths something golden flickered. Then it faded and she moved to help Mr. Copper.

"Morvin, get through!" the Doctor called. The other man thrust his way into the mass of twisted metal, but it wasn't enough. He was stuck halfway.

The Doctor stopped behind him. "Mr. Van Hoff, I know we've only just met, but you'll have to excuse me!" He set his shoulder against Morvin's behind, and shoved.

"That's it!" Astrid called as he pushed through. "We've got you!" She grabbed his arm and helped him away.

"Doctor!" Rose yelled. "Doctor you've got to go! We can't hold it much longer!" Panic made her voice sharp.

"Information override!" the Doctor directed his words at the Host, who paused momentarily. "You will tell me the point of origin of your command structure!"

"I can't hold it!" Mr. Copper's anguished voice echoed through the stairwell.

"Information," the Host replied. "Deck 31."

"Thank you," the Doctor said, and then darted into the blockage.

Rose grabbed him and pulled him to her. The Host was almost through the hole. "Let go!" the Doctor ordered Mr. Copper. With a cry he released the pipe. Bits of metal crashed down on the Host. Its constant chant of "kill, kill, kill," sputtered, and then was silent.
Rose laced her fingers through the Doctor's as he led them away from the stairwell. He pushed the door at the end of the hallway open, and they walked into a large, low-ceilinged room. It was a kitchen. Stoves lined the walls and trays of food sat forgotten on trolleys.

"Look, Morvin. Food!" Foon pointed at them.

"I'm glad someone's happy," Rickston snarked.

Morvin glared at him. "Don't have any, then." The others surrounded the trolleys, grabbing pastries and other snacks. The events of the past hour had been trying at the least, and as they had a moment to relax they realized that none of them had eaten in hours.

Rose and the Doctor stood apart. He was fiddling with the coms unit and she refused to let him out of her sight. It had been close earlier, with the Host, closer than she liked. And honestly, she wasn't sure that she could be around Rickston without slapping him.

"Mr. Frame," the Doctor said. "Are you still there?"

"Yes, sir," the officer replied. "But I've got Host outside. I've sealed the door."

"They've been programmed to kill," the Doctor mused. "Why would anyone do that?"

"That's not the only problem, Doctor." Mr. Frame's voice was apologetic. "I had to use a maximum deadlock on the door, which means—that no one can get in. I'm sealed off. Even if you can fix the Titanic, you can't get to the bridge."

The Doctor ran a hand through his hair. "Right, fine. One problem at a time." His lips pulled into a thin line as he stared at Rose for a moment. She raised an eyebrow. "What's on Deck 31?"

"Um, that's down below. I-it's nothing, just where we keep the host." Mr. Frame sounded confused. "Why?"

The Doctor buzzed the sonic at the coms unit. The screen shifted and displayed a map of the ship. A thick black bar covered part of Deck 31. "D'you see that panel? Completely shielded, no light, no heat, no power, nothing." He slipped his spectacles in place.

"I've never seen it before."

The Doctor looked at Rose again. "I'll bet you any sum you like that that panel caused the power fluctuation earlier." Rose shook her head.

"You never pay up."

He smiled at her. "Cheeky."

"I'll try intensifying the scanner," Mr. Frame said.

"Good, you do that." The Doctor paused. "See you soon—I hope," he added under his breath.

Astrid joined them with a plate of food. "I saved you some. Even if you are a Time King from Garraby you still need to eat."


She smiled at Astrid. "Yeah, thanks. This one forgets to eat sometimes." They sat down on the floor
a little bit away from the others.

"So, are you a—Time Lord, too?" she asked Rose, stumbling a bit over the unfamiliar title.

Rose laughed. "Nah, not me. Just a human."

Astrid's eyes widened. "You were serious earlier? You really were born on Earth?" Rose nodded. Astrid grinned. "I met an alien!"

"Oi!" the Doctor said. "And what am I, chopped liver?"

Rose snorted. "If you were you wouldn't talk so much!" He glared at her, but without heat.

Astrid tilted her head, studying them intently. "You don't look alien. Not like Bannakaffalata."

The Doctor shrugged. "You look Time Lord. Did you think that humans and stonians had a patent on this body style? It's eminently practical, after all. And besides," he grinned at them. "We came first."

She paused, considering. "You look good for 903," she said finally.

"You should see him in the morning," Rose teased. The Doctor tried to look offended, but failed.

"Okay," Astrid replied. They both blinked at her. She blushed a bit, and then explained, "I'm a little unemployed now, and I've got no one back on Sto—just a dead end life. And you've got a space ship—I was hoping that I could, I don't know, ride with you?" Her expression turned wistful. "Travel a bit, see a little more of the universe?"

The Doctor looked at Rose. She smiled at him encouragingly. He turned back to Astrid. "Yeah, okay. It's a little quiet with just the two of us on board." He smiled at Rose. "The old girl likes a party."

"Doctor," Mr. Copper called as he joined them. "It must be past midnight Earth time."

The Doctor checked his watch. "So it is. Merry Christmas."

"This Christmas thing," Astrid interrupted. "What's it all about?"

The Doctor leaned back a bit. "Now, that's a long story. I should know, I was there. Got the last room."

Rose swatted his arm. "It's about peace, and thanksgiving, like he said earlier. It's about celebrating the passing of another year." Her face fell. "It's about family. My mum—there was just the two of us, my dad died when I was small—but she would put up the tree and make Christmas dinner, and we'd make hot cocoa and unwrap presents and watch 'It's a Wonderful Life.'" She sighed. The Doctor rubbed his thumb across the back of her hand and she smiled at him.

"Supposedly," he began, "it's a festival celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ, an important figure in the Christian religion. But the actual person, and yes there was a young man named Jesus—the issue isn't his existence, it's the question of divinity—was born sometime in the Summer or Fall." He contemplated the wall. "The church moved the holiday to coincide with the Winter Solistice, a pagan festival. It marks the longest night of the year, the turning point, the beginning of the end of Winter. It's about hope, really, and new beginnings."

"If the planet is waking up," Mr. Copper asked, "can't we signal them?"
The Doctor raised an eyebrow. "And do what? They haven't got spaceships, not yet anyway."

"But I've read about it," Mr. Copper protested. "They have shuffles, space shuffles."

Rose frowned. "Mr. Copper, where exactly did you get your degree?"

His face fell. "Honestly?"

The Doctor nodded. "Just between us."

The older man sat down next to them. "Mrs. Golightly's Happy Traveling University and Laundromat."

Astrid gasped. "You lied to the corporation in order to get the job?"

Mr. Copper shrugged. "I'm an old man. I spent my youth as a traveling salesman, and reached retirement with nothing to show for it—not even a home. And Earth sounded so exotic."

The Doctor smiled. "I suppose it is, yeah."

"How do you know it so well?" Astrid asked. "I mean, Rose was born there and all, but you're just as much of an alien to her as you are to us."

His eyes darkened. Rose squeezed his hand and leaned into him. He let go of her hand and slipped his arm around her. "My planet is gone. Destroyed, years ago. And then, there was the Earth." He smiled at her. "I'd been there before, mind you, always trouble brewing on Earth. And I met Rose, and it's her home, so I figured I'd stick around."

A loud banging interrupted their conversation. "It's the host!" Rickson yelled.

"Run!" the Doctor responded. They ran.

They ended up in the engine room. Beneath them the nuclear storm drives churned away, a ball of seething flame and pulsing energy. A gaping chasm lay between them and the exit, and the only way across was a narrow catwalk that looked badly damaged.

"That thing will never take our weight!" Morvin protested.

"You're going last, mate," Rickston said.

"It's Nitrophene metal!" That was the Doctor. "It's stronger than it looks."

"In this case, Rickston is right. Me and Foon should go—" Morvin was unable to finish his sentence. As he approached the edge of the platform, the compromised metal buckled and twisted, sending him over the edge and down into the engines.

Foon screamed and threw herself at the breach. The Doctor and Astrid caught her. "Bring him back!" she sobbed at the Doctor. "You promised! Bring him back!"

"I know, Foon." The Doctor's face was terribly, terribly sad. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, but I can't."

She sobbed again and he held her. "I'm sorry," he repeated. Rose felt ill. Morvin was clever, and funny, and nice. So was Foon. They didn't deserve this.

"Doctor!" Mr. Copper called. "The Host are coming!"
Rickston started across the narrow bridge. "I'm not waiting!"

"Careful!" the Doctor barked. "Take it slowly." The ship shuddered and threw Rickston on his stomach. "You're all right!" the Doctor called. "You can do this!" He turned to the door and used the sonic to close it and scramble the lock. "Should buy us some time."

"And leave us trapped!" Mr. Copper objected.

"Not trapped," the Doctor disagreed. "Just—inconveniently circumstanced."

Rickston had made it across. He did a little dance on the opposite platform and crowed, "who's good!"

"Bannakaffalata, you next. And you, Astrid," the Doctor ordered. Foon leaned against the wall, tears leaking down her cheeks. Rose was trying to talk to her, urging her to get across.

"What for?" the other woman asked. "What am I gonna do without him?"

"Rose, you need to get across now!" the Doctor said.

"I'm not leavin' her!" she protested.

The Doctor put a hand on her arm. "Leave her to me. Just get across the bridge!"

"What, like Gwennyth?" Rose snapped back. She paled as the Doctor winced as if she'd slapped him. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean—I just don't want to leave her."

"I promise I will bring her, just get across," he pleaded. She searched his face for a moment, then nodded and went to the bridge.

He turned to the other woman. "Foon, you need to go now."

"Doctor, the door is locked!" Rickston yelled from the other side. "We need that whirring key thing of yours!"

The Doctor ignored him. "What would Morvin want you to do?"

Foon shook her head, eyes closed tightly, tears dripping down her cheeks. "He don't want nothing, he's dead!"

"Doctor! I can't open the door!" panic made Rickston's voice shrill. The Doctor glanced from one to the other for a long moment. "She'll get us all killed if we can't get out!" His gaze settled on Rose, who was still on the bridge, and Astrid, and Bannakaffalata, and Mr. Copper.

He gripped Foon's shoulders tightly and forced her to look at him. "Mrs. Van Hoff, I am coming back for you." She nodded, and he dashed to the bridge.

"Too many people!" Bannakaffalata called.

"Just keep going!" the Doctor replied. The metal groaned and shifted, sending them to their knees.

"It's going to fall!" Astrid cried.

"It's just settling!" The Doctor said. "Keep going!"
Achingly slowly they made their way across the bridge. It was a difficult walk—the path was narrow and uneven and they had to move carefully to avoid damaging it. They had reached the midway point when Mr. Copper suddenly stopped.

"Doctor!" he yelled. "The Host have stopped!"

The Doctor froze. He was right, the banging was gone. Why hadn't he noticed? Was he becoming careless in his old age? No, that wasn't right. He'd been too focused on Rose, on making sure she was safe. He'd blocked out anything that could be a distraction. "So they have. Why would they do that?" He looked around. "Where have they gone?"

"Never mind that!" Rickston replied. "Keep coming!"

Astrid glanced up, and gasped. "Doctor!"

Mr. Copper followed her gaze. "Oh, I think we've forgotten the Christmas tradition that Angels have wings!"

The Host were descending. Their robotic faces were serene, and in the light of the engines their white robes seemed to glow with an unearthly light. They reached up and pulled off the golden halos that were affixed to their heads. A crackling roar cut through the air and a burst of white hot light collided with one of the hosts. Tendrils of electricity arced over it, and then it was plummeting down into the engines.

The Doctor stared at Rose. She was holding a strange-looking gun. "Where did you get that?" shock made his voice squeaky.

"The Toclofane," she said, and stowed it back in her purse. "But it's useless now, takes ten minutes to recharge."

The Doctor shook his head. One Host down, four to go. He grabbed a loose section of pipe. "Arm yourselves!" The others did the same.

"Information," one of the hosts said in flat tones, "kill." Then the halos were slicing through the air towards them. For a while they managed to beat the razor-sharp metal circles off, but eventually they began to tire. The Doctor cried out as one of them sliced into his arm. Mr. Copper almost fell as another caught him across his waist. Astrid, unused to lifting heavy objects repeatedly could hardly keep up.

"I can't!" she sobbed. Rose winced as one of the halos left a long, shallow cut across her back.

"Bannakaffalata, stop!" The alien dropped his section of pipe and turned to face Astrid. "Bannakaffalata, proud." He pulled his shirt apart. "Bannakaffalata, cyborg!" A ripple of blue energy spread around him. Sparks flew from the Host. For a moment they hung suspended in the air, and then they dropped like stones.

"Electromagnetic pulse to cancel out the robotics! Bannakaffalata, that was brilliant!" the Doctor crowed. When he turned to congratulate him further, the smile faded from his face. The alien was lying on his back on the bridge. Astrid crouched next to him.

"He's used up all his power!" she cried. "But it's okay, we can recharge you."

Bannakaffalata shook his head. "Too late," he said quietly.

"But you haven't bought me that drink yet," Astrid reminded him, tears in her eyes.
Bannakaffalata smiled. "Pretty girl." His chest plate beeped, and he was dead.

The Doctor gripped Rose’s hand tightly. Tears stood out in her eyes as she watched Astrid, who was crying freely, close his eyes. Mr. Copper pushed a few buttons and pulled a metal tube out of his chest plate.

"Leave him alone!" Astrid snapped.

"Forgive me," Mr. Copper replied, "but it's the E.M.P. Transmitter. I used to sell these things; they'd always give me a bed for the night in the cyborg caravans. They're good people, but if we can recharge it we can use it as a weapon against the host!" He put a comforting hand on her arm. "I think Bannakaffalata would want us to have it."

"What about that gun thing?" Rickston called.

Rose shook her head. "Still recharging."

The Doctor took control. "All right, we've got to keep moving."

"Bannakaffalata might have saved us all," Mr. Copper told Astrid.

"Tell him that!" Rickston pointed behind them. One of the host had landed on the bridge. It twitched, and then stood, a halo clenched in its metal hands.

"Information, kill."

"Use the E.M.P!" Rickston shouted.

"It needs to recharge!" Mr. Copper replied.

"Hold on! Override, loophole, security protocol, um, 10!" The Doctor said frantically. The Host kept coming. "666? Uh, 21! Four, five, six, seven, eight? Oh, I don't know, 42? One!"

The Host paused. "Information, state request."

"Brilliant!" The Doctor motioned for the others to keep moving. "Right. You've been ordered to kill the survivors, but why?"

"Information, no witnesses." Astrid gasped. Rose pushed her forward.

"Keep going!"

The Doctor frowned. "But this ship's gonna fall on the earth and kill everyone. The human race has nothing to do with the Titanic, so that contravenes your orders, yes?"

"Information, incorrect."

His frown deepened. "But, why would you want to destroy the Earth?"

"Information," the Host responded. "It is the plan."

"Plan?" the Doctor scoffed. "What plan?"

"Information. The override entitles you to three questions. Those questions have been used. You will die now."
A rope looped around it. "Oh no you don't!" Foon yelled. She tied the knot. "You're coming with me." She took one last look at the others, closed her eyes tightly, and jumped.

"No!" the Doctor screamed. He bent over, following their descent. Foon gripped the rope tightly and the Host fell with her. He stared after them until they faded from view, and sat there, frozen. Rose's hand was pressed tightly over her mouth, her eyes wide. Finally, the Doctor stood. "No more," he said quietly, his voice ragged. "No more!" he yelled. He turned to face the others, who were waiting for him on the other side, and scrambled across.

They burst through the doors and into another room, some kind of repair center. The Doctor handed Astrid the E.M.P. Transmitter. "Get yourselves to reception," he told Rose. "You'll be safe there. Mr. Copper, you've got staff access to the computer system, get an SOS out there. Astrid, where are they power points?"

"Under the coms," she replied. He turned the Transmitter over in her hand. "Point that end at the powerpoint. When it's charged a blue light will come on. Now go!" He handed Rose the sonic. "You know what setting to use."

"You're not coming with," she said slowly, realization dawning in her eyes.

His lips pulled into a thin line as he shook his head. "Someone on Deck 31 wants to destroy the Earth. I want to know why."

She matched his expression with her own. "Well, then Rickston can take the sonic, because I'm not leaving you."

"Rose," his voice was low and urgent. "I need you to keep them safe."

"And who's gonna look after you?" she asked, her voice sharp. "'Cause I know you, Doctor. You'll swan off down there and be in a world of trouble. You'll get yourself captured by whoever started this, you know you will."

He grinned at her. "Rose Tyler, you know me too well."

"And you know me well enough to know that I'm coming with."

He shook his head. "I need you here. Rose. I won't be able to concentrate on what I'm doing if I'm constantly worrying about the others." He gripped her shoulders and stared into her eyes. Most people would have wilted under the force of his gaze, but Rose was stubborn and he was right, she knew him far too well to be intimidated. "Do this for me. Keep them safe. There might be other Host out there, and you are the most capable person I know." She bit her bottom lip as she searched his eyes. Apparently she found what she was looking for, because she nodded once. He released her.

"Right then, I'm off."

"Wait, Doctor." He paused. She grabbed the lapels of his tuxedo and pulled him in for a kiss. He was tense for a moment, surprised, but gradually he relaxed into her. His hands slipped around her waist and ran up her back, one to tangle in her hair, one to press her closer to him. Her hands remained clenched in his jacket.

It was not like their kisses on the TARDIS. It was not gentle or loving or exploratory. It was hard and hot and fierce, lips and teeth and tongue, fire and passion and need. It was everything they wouldn't—couldn't put into words.

_I want you. I love you. Come back to me._
They were breathing heavily when they separated. He straightened his jacket and she smoothed her hair. He squeezed her hand, and then he was gone. She turned to face the others, who were looking anywhere but at her.

"Right. Let's go."
Getting himself captured by the Host and then ordering them to take him, as a stowaway, to the nearest figure of authority probably wasn't his brightest idea, the Doctor realized as he stood in front of what remained of Max Capricorn, owner and CEO of Max Capricorn Cruiseliners. Rose would love this, he thought as he stared at the head, and that's all it was, a head and a life-support system. So many puns were whizzing around his brain, and Rose would be right there adding to them, after she finished berating him for his carelessness and reliance on his ability to improvise instead of concocting a suitable plan.

Max's voice broke through his thoughts. "Who the hell is this?"

He grinned at the Cyborg and bent at the waist slightly, his hands behind his back. "I'm the Doctor, hello!"

"Information," one of the Host replied. "He is a stowaway."

"Kill him," Max sneered.

That wouldn't do. At the very least he'd regenerate and Rose would not be pleased with him. At the worst he wouldn't, and that didn't really bear thinking about. "No no no, you can't, not now! Come on, Max, you're giving me so much good material, like 'how to get ahead in business.'" He waited.

Realization lit Max's features. "Oho, the office joker. I like a funny man. No one's been funny with me for years."

"I can't think why." He'd almost forgotten sarcasm. This body was good at it, but nothing like the last him. He had sarcasm down to an art form.

"176 years of running the company have taken their toll," Max replied.

The Doctor scratched his ear. "Maybe, but—nice wheels."

"A life support system," his tone was bitter, "in a society that despises cyborgs. I've had to hide away for years, running the company via hologram."

Rose silently thanked Bannakaffalata for the E.M.P. Transmitter as she opened the door to Reception. They'd used it three times on their way up. She had used her gun once, but the extended charging time meant it wouldn't have worked against the multiple Host that seemed to be lurking in every room they encountered.

"Mr. Copper, keep an eye on the Host," Rose said as they burst into the room. A quick fire of the Transmitter had them down and out. "Astrid, contact the bridge. Rickston," she didn't quite hit civil, but she managed not slapping him, "seal the doors. Hold down this button," she showed him the sonic, "for six seconds over the keypads. It'll scramble the controls." She took stock of their
surroundings while the others busied about their tasks.

"What are you going to do?" the other woman asked her after a brief conversation with Midshipman Frame. They were in the final cycle now, less than eight minutes left. Rickston returned and handed over the sonic.

Rose pulled the Dimension Cannon out of her purse. "You lot will be fine here. I'm going after the Doctor." She fiddled with the dial on the sonic screwdriver and pointed it at the cannon, her tongue caught between her teeth not in play, as it usually was, but in concentration.

Astrid watched as she changed the settings several more times. "What are you doing?" she ventured finally.

"There's a field blocking teleportation from the ship. It's enough to short out the cannon, but I think I can fix it. Wouldn't have a chance without the screwdriver." The corner of her mouth twisted up. "The things you pick up when your life depends on it."

"If it was fixed, could you teleport us to the bridge?"

Rose shook her head. "Not enough power. On my own I could manage a couple trips, but with passengers I'm limited to one round-trip jump." Her voice hardened. "And I'm not leaving without the Doctor."

"Couldn't we charge it?" Astrid asked, glancing around the room. "There's a powerpoint by the teleport booth."

"Wrong kind of power. Not even the sonic screwdriver will charge the cannon." She stopped her tinkering for a moment, and looked at Astrid. The other woman fought the urge to take a step back. Rose's eyes were dark and intense, and for a moment Astrid felt like she could see straight into her soul, as if she was stripped bare. "There're all these stories about him, you know," she began. "The Doctor, I mean. Especially on Earth. There was this group, called themselves LINDA: London Investigation N'Detective Agency, they tracked him through history, and he was everywhere. But people forget. They give him these names, the Oncoming Storm, the Bringer of Darkness, the Lonely God, and they forget that behind all of that is a man. A wonderful, lunatic of a man who takes his tea strong enough to stand on its own and puts his fingers in the marmalade and wears glasses because he thinks they make him look clever and licks absolutely everything. And he carries the universe on his shoulders." She laughed. It was not a happy sound. "Like Atlas, he is. And the weight of it all—it's a wonder that the weight of us doesn't crush him. But he keeps going, he keeps traveling and living and fighting because he's the only one left and he's the Doctor and that's what he does."

"Why—why are you telling me this?" Astrid asked. Her eyes were wide and frightened and Rose was sorry that she had to be the one to take away this woman's illusions.

"Because he forgets sometimes," she replied quietly. "Because he starts to believe these stories. He believes that he can do everything, can save everyone, but he can't. Not all the time. Not even most of the time. And the universe needs him." She took a deep breath. "And, because if you're going to travel with him than there's things you need to know and its easier if you start out knowing them." She paused. "I always did, but it would have been nice if someone told me all the same. Knowing isn't the same as having someone lay it out for you."

"Like what?" Astrid was intrigued now, if slightly nervous.

"Like what happens when you're in the middle." Rose's voice was very quiet. "If there's a choice
between you and the universe, or you and a planet, or you and a village, or even just you and him—it's hard, because the right answer is never 'you.' And he hates it when people die for him, he really does, because he piles the guilt up and it just adds more weight, but that's how it has to be, sometimes." She met Astrid's eyes squarely. "If he can't make that choice, then you have to. It's hard, because you want the choice to be 'you,' but that would be wrong."

"Does this happen a lot?" She was nervous now, properly. The things that Rose was saying, they seemed—final. Did she expect trouble? Well, of course there would be trouble, but did she expect more fatalities? The Doctor seemed confident that he could get to the bottom of what happened on his own, without any sort of weapon.

Rose shrugged. "It can. Because they—the aliens, the ones you end up fighting, they know that the Doctor's greatest weakness is the people he cares about. They'll try to use you against him. You can't let them." They were quiet for a moment as she examined the cannon. "And there's one more thing," she said finally. "If things go pear-shaped down there, I need you to promise me something." Astrid nodded, her eyes fixed on Rose's. "Make him take you with. Don't let him be alone. He needs someone with him, to remind him that he's only a man, that it isn't his fault." She nodded again. Rose smiled sadly. "You'll make a wonderful companion, Astrid Peth."

"You'll come back," the other woman said. She tried for confidence, but it was hard to muster in the face of Rose's speech. "You'll come back and you'll bring him with." Rose wished she could believe those words. "At least," Astrid continued, "at least let me come with you."

Max frowned. "Host, situation report."

"Information," the robot replied. "Titanic is still in orbit."

His frown deepened. "Let me see." The ponderous machine trundled forward and the Doctor was forced to retreat to the side rather quickly, or risk being squashed. He muttered about rude cyborgs and people who didn't get their license, conveniently forgetting that he had failed his own driving test.

"We should have crashed by now," Max said as he moved to the edge. "What's gone wrong?" His eyebrows shot up as he looked over the edge. He turned back to the Doctor. "The engines are still running! They should have stopped."

"When they do the Earth gets roasted," the Doctor protested. "I don't understand, what's the Earth got to do with it?"

Max glared at him. "This, interview, is terminated." He began to roll away.

Rose gave Astrid one more searching look, and then nodded. "Yeah, okay." She snapped the lid of the Dimension cannon closed and pressed a few buttons. The display lit up and she grinned. "It's working! Fantastic!" She stood, and Astrid followed. "Put your hand over the cannon," Rose instructed. "And I'm sorry, but it's going to be a bit uncomfortable."

'A bit uncomfortable' did not come close to describing how travelling via Dimension cannon felt, Astrid thought as she wiped her mouth. The remains of the food they'd found earlier was splashed across the metal grating of the floor at her feet. Rose stood nearby. It really was unfair that she wasn't throwing up as well, Astrid thought. Of course, she was probably used to it.

"Feeling better?" Rose asked quietly. Astrid nodded. "S a bit rough, I know. I was sick the first few
time I jumped. Gets easier, after a while.” Her lips quirked into a smile. "And this was only a short hop through space. Imagine crashing through whole parallel worlds, and time." Astrid shuddered. It did not sound pleasant.

"Wait wait wait!” They both froze as the Doctor's voice drifted through the air. They were close. "I can work it out. It's like a task. I'm your apprentice, just watch me." Rose motioned for Astrid to follow her, and they silently crept closer to the sound of his voice. "So, the business is failing, and you wreck the ship, so that makes things even worse. Oh yes!” He hesitated. "No. Yes! The business isn't failing, it's failed." Rose was grinning to herself, despite the severity of the situation. The Doctor was in top form. She loved to watch him work out puzzles, talk his way through them until he figured them out and his eyes would shine like polished wood—warm and dark.

"My own board voted me out." She frowned, that sounded like—but it couldn't be. She motioned for Astrid to stay back and cautiously poked her head out from behind their shelter. It was. It was Max Capricorn—cyborg. "Stabbed me in the back."

"If you had a back," the Doctor muttered under his breath. "So, you scupper the ship, wipe out any survivors just in case someone's rumbled you, and the board find their shares halved in value."

Rose took in the scene in front of her. The Doctor, standing with his hands in his pockets, as relaxed as if he was on the TARDIS despite the four Host surrounding him. Max Capricorn, apparently a cyborg in front of him. Her gun was ready to go, but that would take out one Host and leave the other three to attack them, and they'd be more than able. The E.M.P. Transmitter was upstairs with Mr. Copper. Rose checked the cannon—one trip. She had enough left for one trip with passengers, and if she made another round trip herself, she wouldn't be able to bring anyone else. She growled low in her throat.

"Oh, but that's not enough.” A dark timbre crept into the Doctor's voice, a tone that warned of death and destruction, of violence and rage. "No, because if a Max Capricorn ship hits the Earth it destroys an entire planet." The hairs on her neck were standing on end. He stalked towards Max Capricorn, and Rose wondered for a brief moment if the other man realized how much danger he was in. "Outrage back home, scandal! The business is wiped out,” along with everyone on Earth, he does not mention, but it hangs in the air anyway.

"And," Max continued. "The entire board thrown in jail, for mass murder."

"While you sit safe inside that box—an omnistate impact chamber. Indestructible, they are. You could sit through a supernova in one of those.” He was standing a few feet away from Max. Rose couldn't see his face, but she knew the look in his eyes—an empty, yawning darkness like a chasm. The only reason she wasn't terrified when she looked at him like that was because she'd seen him before. She wondered what kept Max from being afraid. Was it overconfidence, or was he really that ignorant?

"I have men waiting to retrieve me from the ruins." He sounded almost smug. Smug about a plan to destroy her entire planet, smug about the murder of over six billion people. The Doctor called himself a murderer. He had nothing on Max Capricorn. "And enough off-world accounts to retire me to the beaches of Penhaxico two, where the ladies, I am told, are fond of—metal."

"So that's the plan." His voice was quiet, but scathing. "A retirement plan. Two thousand people on this ship, six billion people below: all of them slaughtered. And why? Because Max Capricorn, is a loser."

"I never lose," the cyborg gritted out.
Rose scanned the walls desperately. She needed to get to them, and fast. Running was out. She’d be defenseless, just another hostage. Then her eyes found the forklift. She grinned. Perfect. She turned to Astrid. "Follow me," she whispered. They picked their way to the forklift. A quick buzz of the sonic had the machine hotwired and ready to go.

"Can you drive one of these?" the other woman asked.

Rose glanced at the controls. "Not too different from what I'm used to. I can drive stick, after all."

Back in the main section, she could hear the Doctor respond. "You couldn't even sink the Titanic!"

"What are you going to do?" Astrid looked worried.

"Max is controlling the Host," Rose explained. "Take him out, and the Host will back down. Then the Doctor can get to the bridge and restart the engines before the ship crashes and destroys the Earth."

"And you're going to do that with a forklift." She sounded unconvinced.

"If I have to," Rose responded quietly, "I'll take him over the edge."

Astrid blanched. "That would be suicide."

Rose shrugged. "Remember what I said Astrid. Me or the planet. It's not much of a choice."

The other woman looked at her oddly for a moment. "No, I guess it's not." Then she reached up and pulled Rose out of the driver's seat.

"Astrid, what!" Rose cried, as the other woman shoved her to the ground. She was on her feet in a moment but the forklift was already moving.

"I can cancel the engines from here, Doctor!" Max spat. An alarm split the air.

"Engines closing," the computer stated. "Engines closing."

"You can't do this!" the Doctor yelled.

"Host, hold him!" Max snapped. Robotic arms grabbed the Doctor's and held him fast. He struggled, but it was useless. He could handle one, but two of them overpowered even him.

"Shame we couldn't work together, Doctor," Max observed. "You're rather good. All that banter, and not a word wasted." He sneered. "Time for me to retire. The Titanic is falling. The sky will burn. Let the Christmas inferno commence!"

"Mister Capricorn!" The Doctor was unsure who was more surprised to hear a woman's voice ring out through the room. A forklift sat a few feet away, and Astrid Peth was in the driver's seat. "I resign!" She threw the machine into gear and plowed into Max Capricorn.

"Astrid, don't!" the Doctor cried. She continued on.

"Astrid!" Another woman's voice split the air, a very familiar voice. His eyes widened further as Rose emerged from behind a slab of twisted metal. "I'm sorry, Doctor!" she said, panting. "I tried to stop her, but it's faster than it looks." One of the Host made to grab her, but she fired her gun at it, and it crashed to the ground, systems fried. A second Host launched a halo at the forklift. It sliced into the side. The two holding the Doctor remained as they were.
Max Capricorn and Astrid were locked in struggle. He could not move her, but she was equally unable to shift him. "Astrid, the break line's gone!" the Doctor yelled.

She glanced back at them for just a moment. "I'm sorry," she mouthed, and then she pulled a lever. The forklift activated, its platform rising, pulling Max's wheels off the ground. Astrid floored the machine and it rocketed forward—over the edge and into the engines.

The Host released the Doctor as the two vehicles careened out of sight. Their previous figure of authority was gone, and the order to kill was no longer valid. The Doctor ran to the edge and stared over. They were faint now, all ready fading from sight. He closed his eyes. Ash and dust. She was ash and dust now. Just like Morvin, and Foon, and Bannakaffalata. And as she fell—he remembered that look too well. Remembered a hand stretching out to him, his name on another woman's lips, the same sense of terrible helplessness.

"Titanic, falling. Voyage, terminated." The ship's computer interrupted his thoughts. He had a planet to save. He stood and opened his eyes. Rose was next to him, still staring at the engines. Her lips were a thin slash across her face, her eyes wide.

"How did you get down here?" he asked. His voice was flat and empty. Too many people had died today for one greedy man. In his long life he'd seen so many atrocities perpetrated for the sake of money. Was it any wonder he hated the stuff? Was it so surprising that he preferred not to carry it?

She held up her right hand. A thick leather strap was wrapped around her wrist. An oversized dial, like a kind of watch only far more technical sat in the center. "Dimension cannon. Jumping between worlds won't work, but it will still go through space and time. I meddled with the sonic and got around the field blocking the teleports internally. Still couldn't go outside the ship, though."

He studied the cannon for a moment. "Set it for the bridge, if you would."

She nodded, and pressed a few buttons. "It's done."

He set his hand on top of it. "Let's go."

Midshipman Alonzo Frame did not believe that he could be surprised any more, not after what had happened in the past few hours. The ship was going down, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. The planet—the planet was going to burn, and he couldn't stop it. He'd had his captain pull a gun on him and seen Host turn murderous. He'd trusted a stranger with his life, and the lives of everyone below him. He'd defied his captain on his very first voyage, and it was also his last, as he was most definitely going to die. No, there was nothing that could surprise him, not anymore.

He was wrong. A sound like thunder split the air and a flash of light filled the cabin. When the spots cleared from his eyes, Alonzo could only stare. A man in a battered tuxedo and a woman in a ripped and stained red evening dress were standing in a space that had just been empty. The man started forward. "Midshipman Frame, at last!" He held out his hand. "I'm the Doctor, and this is Rose."

Alonzo shook the Doctor's hand, his face dazed, and saluted to Rose. She waved him away. "There's nothing we can do. The power's gone. The ship's going to fall."

"Rose, the sonic!" She handed it over. "What's your first name?" he asked the sailor.

"A-alonzo."

The Doctor paused and stared at him, and then flashed a grin at Rose. "Really? I've always wanted
to say that!" He grabbed the wheel and gave it a spin. "Allons-y Alonzo!"

The ship tossed and bucked as it turned towards the planet below. Rose hung on to one of the control panels desperately while the Doctor remained at the wheel. Midshipman Frame—Alonzo, clung to another panel on the opposite side.

"We're still falling, Doctor!" Rose reminded him.

"I've got a plan, Rose!" he replied. She didn't look convinced. Neither did Alonzo.

"Really, because this feels like the opposite of what we want!"

He looked over, locking eyes with her. "Trust me."

She bit her lip, and nodded. They continued down. Fire flickered around the prow of the ship—an expression of the friction caused by their entrance into the Earth's atmosphere.

"Where are we headed?" the Doctor shouted.

Rose consulted the screen in front of her. "Guess!" she shouted back, her voice heavy with irony.

"London?" She nodded. He groaned.

"We're headed directly for Buckingham palace!"

The Doctor gritted his teeth as he held the wheel in an upright position. Not yet, not yet. He needed the friction, if he could just get the secondary drives started in time...

"Rose!" he yelled over the noise. "The phone!" She grabbed it and held it out to him. He dialed.

"Could you get me Buckingham palace?" Her eyebrows shot up. The Queen. The Doctor knew the Queen? "Security code 771," he ground out. "Get her out of there!"

"Engine Active." The red flashing screen suddenly turned green. With a yell, the Doctor pulled the wheel all the way back. They continued down. Rose was certain that it was over. They would crash into London and destroy the world—but at what seemed like the last moment the ship pulled up. They soared just over the palace and back into the sky. The force of the change in direction threw Rose off of the consul and against the wall. She noticed that Alonzo was in much the same situation.

The Doctor laughed loud and long as he steered them back towards the stars. Alonzo rang the small bell hanging from the wall and Rose could not stop smiling. She was sure that she was grinning like an idiot, but it was impossible not to. They were alive. They were alive and they were going to stay alive.

The Doctor wandered over to where she and Alonzo sat with their backs against the wall of the bridge. "Used the heat of reentry to fire up the secondary storm drive," he confided. "Wasn't quite sure it would work. Glad it did." He grinned. "Unsinkable, that's us." He laced his fingers with Rose's. She smiled back at him, her tongue between her teeth.

"We made it," Alonzo said, like he still couldn't quite believe he was alive.

The smile melted off of the Doctor's face. "Not all of us."

It seemed like hours later when Alonzo, Rose and the Doctor met up with Mr. Copper and Rickston
Slade. She knew that it was less than forty minutes, but her body seemed to believe otherwise. She could sleep for a week.

"I've sent the SOS," Alonzo informed them. "A rescue ship should be here within twenty minutes. And they're digging out the records of Max Capricorn. Should be quite a story."

Mr. Copper grimaced. "They'll want to talk to all of us, I suppose?"

"I'd think so, yeah," Alonzo responded, puzzled.

"I think one or two inconvenient truths will come to light," Mr. Copper said, turning to the Doctor, "but still, it's my own fault, and ten years in jail is better than dying."

The Doctor did not respond. His face was a mask—blank to the others, but she could read him like a book. Pain surged just below the surface, raw and biting. Rickston Slade approached them. Rose was startled to see that he was crying. Had the events of the past few hours changed him that much?

"Doctor," he choked. "I never said...thank you." He embraced the Time Lord. The Doctor patted him on the back, but his face remained flat. Rickston stepped back and his lips twisted into a strange smile. "The funny thing is, I said Max Capricorn was falling apart. Just before the crash I sold all my shares—transferred them to his rival companies. It's made me rich. What do you think of that?" Then his phone rang, and he wandered away, talking about locking shares and bonds.

If possible, the Doctor's eyes darkened further and Rose was reminded of how he looked at Max Capricorn, at Cassandra on Platform One. Money. It was always about the Money.

Mr. Copper watched him go. "Of all the people to survive," he commented, "he's not the one you would have chosen, is he?" Rose knew the answer immediately. No. Morvin, Foon, Bannakaffalata, Astrid—who reminded her of herself so much, all of them were more deserving. They were good people. What he said next struck Rose with almost as much force as a physical blow. "But if you could choose, if you could decide who lives and who dies, that would make you a monster."

A quick buzz of the sonic energized the teleport bracelets, and Rose, the Doctor, and Mr. Copper were soon standing outside the TARDIS. Rose ran her hand over the panels of the door and smiled back at the Doctor. "I'm gonna have a shower. It's gonna take weeks to get the smell of smoke out of my hair." She glanced down at her clothes. "And this dress is beyond hope."

He pressed a gentle kiss to her hair. "Go on, then. Mr. Copper and I are going to have a bit of a chat, and then I'll be in."

"Kay." She stepped back and gave Mr. Copper a kiss on the cheek. "Take care of yourself," she ordered.

"I shall," he promised. She gave the Doctor's hand a squeeze, and then slipped into the TARDIS.

Rose let the ruined dress slither to the floor in the safety of her bathroom. She perfunctorily checked her body in the mirror—no permanent damage, although the cut on her back was stinging something fierce. That was good, meant it was shallow. Probably wouldn't even scar.

No, her scars were on the inside, weren't they?

She turned the water on almost as hot as it would go, and waited for steam to fill the room. When it did, she stepped into the shower. The water seared her skin, but she didn't care. The sensation was a
pleasant contrast to the biting cold she felt inside. She scrubbed at her skin fiercely, grinding away
the oil and smoke that seemed engrained into her pores. She shampooed her hair, rinsed, and did it
again, rinsed and did it again. She scrubbed long after the stains had disappeared. Beneath the
surface, into the corners of her soul, she felt filthy.

She held herself responsible for Astrid's death. Who had told that girl about sacrifice, about choices
and death? She had. Who had allowed her to come, had brought her with the Dimension cannon?
She had. It should have been Rose on that forklift, Rose who at least knew what she was sacrificing,
and for whom. Astrid had known the Doctor for less than a day.

But beyond that Mr. Copper's words screamed in her head.

"If you could decide who lives and who dies, that would make you a monster."

For a time she had held the power of the universe in her hands. For a few shining moments she was a
goddess.

"But this is wrong! You can't control life and death!"

"But I can."

She hadn't remembered, at first. When he took the Vortex from her he must have buried the
memories deep. He told her, later, after she'd adjusted to his regeneration. He hadn't told her exactly
how he'd taken the power of the Vortex out of her, nor could he convey how it felt to be the conduit
of the universe—a murderer. She knew the logic—the Daleks were evil. They would have destroyed
the Doctor and the Earth, eventually everything in the universe in their quest to be supreme, but that
didn't chase away the feeling. Nothing could adequately capture it.

She hadn't remembered, until Torchwood turned on her. Desperate in their quest to discover exactly
what kept Rose Tyler from aging like a human being, they called in a telepath. They had ripped her
mind apart. She remembered the feeling, like her brain was on fire, like her body was being torn to
pieces. Sensations and memories and nightmares and fantasies tumbling over and over like clothes in
the dryer—her most private place cracked open and picked through by individuals who didn't believe
her to be a person. It was going well for them, until they stumbled on something hidden.

The telepath died screaming. Mental overload, the reports said. Tony had read them before he
destroyed them. One more person she killed.

___________________________

Just once he'd like a proper snow, instead of the detritus of a funeral pyre—dust and ashes, ashes and
dust.

He laid the cloth-wrapped body on the pile of wood in front of him and poured a vessel of sweet-
smelling oil over it in an attempt to disguise the odor of burnt flesh. It never worked, he thought as
he touched the burning brand to the pyre. Thick black smoke rose to the heavens and ashes floated
down—ashes and dust. His dearest friend and deadliest enemy—ashes and dust. Just like their
planet, just like their people—ashes and dust in the wind.

Bile rose up in his throat. He choked it down. The TARDIS lights pulsed comfortably. He laid a
hand on the smooth coral in a silent acknowledgement. He wandered the corridors for a while, letting
his ship take him where she would. He was not surprised when he ended up outside the door to
Rose's room. He knocked, but there was no response. He knocked again. When she did not answer,
he opened the door.

The room was empty, and unusually neat. He remembered clothes covering the floor and books
scattered on the dresser. It was almost painfully tidy. Of course, almost two hundred years had passed since she'd last been in the TARDIS. Things were bound to have changed. For a moment he wondered just how much.

The sound of running water distracted him. Right, she said she wanted a shower. He frowned and checked his watch. That was over an hour ago. Rose enjoyed taking her time, but this was a bit much. He knocked on the door. No answer.

"Rose?" he called. No answer. "Rose, are you all right?" Silence. He grabbed the door handle. "I'm coming in."

At first he thought the bathroom was empty. Her dress lay on the warm tile floor—a pool of red against slate gray. Her purse was next to it. He pulled back the shower curtain.

She was sitting on the shower floor, her back against the wall. Her forehead was resting on her knees, her arms pulled her folded legs to her chest. The water pounded against her head and the wall and plastered her hair to her neck and back.

"Rose?" he asked softly. She twitched, and raised her head. The anguish on her face hit him like a punch in the stomach. "Can I come in?"

She bit her lip, and nodded. He toed off his trainers, took off his socks and his tie, and climbed into the shower. He slid down the wall beside her. They sat in silence, the water pouring down on them both.
They sat in silence for what seemed like hours, although the Doctor's excellent internal clock informed him that it has been less than ten minutes. He thanked his wonderful ship for leading him here, when he is obviously needed—one of the benefits of living in a sentient ship that cares for its passengers. She had always cared for Rose, in a way that puzzled him at first, but the TARDIS was an eleven-dimensional being that experienced Time in a way that not even Time Lords could fully comprehend. She had known what Rose would do, what she would become, how she would change him, and apparently the TARDIS approved.

Leading him here, allowing him to find her when she was hurting, was another sign of approval. He knew the look on Rose's face well—it mirrored how he felt. He wasn't quite sure why she felt that way. He was carrying the burden of more lives he failed to save, more destruction he inadvertently caused. He wasn't lying when he said he'd make a bad god. He had enough trouble controlling the consequences of his actions as a man.

"I killed someone today." Rose's voice broke the silence.

He shook his head. "Excellent memory, me, and if I recall, Rickston Slade was still alive when we left the Titanic."

She did not smile. "Not him. Astrid. I killed her."

"What are you talking about?" His voice was warm and laced with confusion. "If anyone killed Astrid, Rose, it was Max Capricorn."

She looked down, refusing to meet his eyes. "I told her about being a companion," she said softly. "Not just the good things, but the things I wish someone had told me when I started traveling with you—about who you are and what that means and hard choices. I told her that if it came down to her or you, it would have to be you." She swallowed and closed her eyes. "And then—it should have been me on the forklift, but she pushed me off. I had the Dimension cannon! I could have jumped back! But she wouldn't listen." Tears mingled with the water from the shower on her cheeks. "I killed her, Doctor."

"Oh, Rose." He pulled her into his arms and she went willingly, her wet skin against his wet clothes. "Astrid made a choice," he said as he held her close. "She saved everyone on Earth and the people left on the ship because she took out the Host. And it hurts, because you feel responsible, but it's not your fault."

"You're a fine one to talk about letting go of guilt," she murmured into the curve of his neck.

"Oi," he said without heat. "Catch me comforting you again if this is the thanks I get." She smiled, and he could feel it against his skin.

"Thank you."

He ran a hand up and down her back. "You're always welcome, Rose." The shower stopped. The TARDIS seemed to believe that Rose was all right now. She wasn't, not totally. He could feel the hard edges beneath, like broken glass through cloth, but she was well enough for now. Who was he kidding? He wasn't better either, but they could both be all right. They were always all right, except when they really, really weren't. And then, well, then they had each other. "Let's get you dried off, and then I was thinking tea." She nodded. "Oh, and the TARDIS picked up a rather interesting
advertisement while you were showering." His lips quirked into a grin. "How do you feel about a little investigation?"

She smiled at him. "Sounds like a plan. Be in the kitchen in ten."

Rose waited until the Doctor left to stand. She didn't mind if he saw her naked, but she had a feeling that he would. He was—strange about certain things, like nudity. They'd seen each other in various states of dress and undress often enough when she originally traveled on the TARDIS—changing, or locked in a jail, or fixing each other up—but it was different now. Things were shifting between them. She didn't mind. She'd been waiting for ages for him to catch up—but not yet. They were too new, too fragile still. Neither one of them was whole yet, but they were getting there.

She would wait to tell him about the dreams. To let him know that she remembered now. That she knew the feel of the turn of the Earth, the pulse of the universe, that she could recall with shattering detail the sound of a million Daleks screaming as they turned to dust, that she remembered killing him. Whatever he said about regeneration, it was death paired with life. The man he was died, and a new one took his place.

He was waiting for her in the kitchen, two mugs of tea on the table and a packet of biscuits beside them. He had already opened the packet and consumed most of his contents. A fond smile lit her features. Always impatient, he was.

"Right!" the Doctor said as she slid into the seat next to him. "There's this company—Adipose Industries, and they're making some rather interesting claims about weight loss." He raised his eyebrows at her. "Fancy taking a look?"

"Let me clear my schedule," she replied. He grinned. The Doctor and Rose Tyler were on their way to another adventure.
Donna Noble wanted to be fantastic. Life, apparently, had other ideas. Oh, she tried, she really did. She tried to find a new job, she even went to Egypt to walk in the dust, like she told him she would. It wasn't the same. Her brief time with him had shown her that he lived his life—differently. There were no guidebooks and bus tours when you traveled with the Doctor, no worrying about reservations and air fare and if it was safe to drink the water. There was danger, and excitement, and a fair bit of running. She missed it, she realized. Even the running. It was a better life, with him. The world around her plodded along in its small, predictable movements while Donna Noble dreamed of the stars and a man who kept the universe in a blue box.

Mrs. Foster was hiding something, she was sure of it. The internet was full of conspiracy theories about Adipose Industries. The weight loss was too regular, too precise to be natural. The results were flimsy—fabricated. It was trouble, and where there was trouble, there was the Doctor. Hopefully. Maybe. If she was lucky and it wasn't like the other times. She'd been looking for almost eight months, because she'd been wrong. He had been terrifying—but lonely, so lonely. She realized what the shadow hanging over him was, now that she had experienced a bit of grief herself: loss, heartache, pain. Whoever 'Rose' was, he loved her very much. She wondered if he ever told her. Donna didn't think so. He kept calling her his 'friend,' but there was more. She'd lost friends before. When she was a teenager her best friend Alex had been killed by a drunk driver. She'd been a wreck, but she'd never had the urge to end an entire species because of it.

She paused for a moment outside the door to her house, collecting her thoughts. Her mother was inside, and, well, was her mother. They'd never been best friends, her and her mum, but it had gotten worse after H.C. Clemens went under and Lance died and her dad—she wasn't going to think about that. Donna took a deep breath and stepped through the door.

"And what time is this?" her mother's voice was sharp.

She rolled her eyes. "How old am I?"

"Not old enough to use a phone." Her mum glared at her from the kitchen. Donna ignored her and fixed herself a cup of tea. It was no use talking to her mother when she was in a mood. They were too alike, she thought as she sipped her tea and her mother ranted behind her. Too sharp, to forceful. Her dad was different, warm and gentle, even when—but she wasn't going to think about that. She didn't blame her mother. It was hard, being on your own. She understood, just a bit. Lance hadn't loved her, not really, and they'd only been together for six months, but she still ached for someone to talk to. She couldn't tell her mum about the Doctor, or even her granddad, although she thought he would understand if anyone could. He believed in aliens, after all. Would it be such a stretch for him to believe that she'd met one?

"Where's granddad?" she asked when her mother stopped for breath.

"Where d'you think? Up the hill! He's always up the hill!"
"I'm back!" the Doctor called as he closed the TARDIS doors. "Rose?"

"Kitchen!" her voice drifted through the TARDIS. He relaxed, and let out the breath he forgot he was holding. It was getting easier to believe that she was still there when he couldn't see her, although he still couldn't completely banish the notion that perhaps he had imagined her presence. He had almost gone mad after—yes. That. He kept imaging that he heard her voice, or he'd catch a glimpse of her out of the corner of his eye, but when he looked properly she was gone. It had been easy to pretend that she was sleeping, or taking a shower, or sitting in the library while he was in the console room. Meeting Donna had helped him to finally accept that she was gone, well and truly gone. He hadn't had the heart to move her jacket from its place in the console room until Donna had accused him of kidnapping her. He wondered sometimes what happened to Donna. He thought of checking up on her, but he quickly dismissed the idea. She had called him 'terrifying,' said he 'scared her to bits.' And besides, as they were he could imagine that she was having a fantastic life like she said she would. Reality, he knew, was often inconveniently contrary.

Rose was standing in the kitchen with her back to the door. She had two mugs on the counter and was pouring hot water from the kettle into them. He leaned up against the door and watched her fix the tea. Even after all this time she knew how he liked his.

"How was it, then?" she asked without turning around. He really needed to find out how she knew where he was with such unerring accuracy. "Still don't see why I couldn't have gone with you." Her tone was disapproving.

"Health and safety inspectors don't have partners," he replied.

She snorted. "Since when has that ever stopped you before?"

"Never," he admitted as he crossed the room to stand next to her. "But I needed you here, monitoring the area for those energy spikes."

"Of which there were none," she informed him.

"You weren't really missing anything," he replied as he grabbed a package of his favorite biscuits out of the cabinet. "Basic slideshow, although there was a reporter who was trying to cause a fuss. I've got a list of their customers and," he pulled what looked like a golden pill that hung on a golden chain out of his pocket, "this little thing. They're passing it off as a free gift but it's definitely alien tech."

Rose handed him his mug. "Well then, you gonna show me some Spock?" she asked, her tongue between her teeth.

"Get ready to be impressed, Rose Tyler," he replied with a grin.

Donna knelt on the blanket next to her granddad, her coat wrapped snugly around her and a thermos of tea between her hands. "I've got Venus," he told her. "Take a look."

She put her eye to the telescope and the bright speck of light resolved itself into a planet.

"S the only planet in the whole solar system named after a woman," he commented.

She smiled as she withdrew. "Good for her."

They sat in silence for a while. "We'll get there one day. Just you wait—in a hundred years we'll be whizzing about through space, rubbing elbows with all them aliens."
"Yeah, okay granddad."

"We will!" he asserted. "Just you wait. They're all over the place these days." He leaned close to her. "If I wait here long enough—"

"I don't suppose you've seen a little blue box," she interrupted.

"What?" He looked at her strangely. "S that slang for somethin?"

She laughed. "No. I mean it. If you ever see a little blue box flying up there in the sky, you shout for me gramps. You just shout."

"I don't understand half the things you say these days," he commented.

"Nor me," she said with a strange smile.

"You've had a funny old time of it lately." He looked away, over the roofs of Chiswick below. "You just, you seem like you're drifting, sweetheart."

Donna shook her head. "'M not drifting, gramps. I'm waiting."

"For what?"

"The right man," she said with a faraway look in her eyes.

Wilf laughed. "Oh, that's it then. Always the same!"

Donna laughed with him. "No, not like that. He had someone—and I'm not interested in him. Skinny streak a' nothing, he is. But he's real." The look was back. "I met him once, and then I just let him fly away. But I'll find him again. If I have to wait a hundred years, I'll find him again."

The Doctor was bent over the console, examining the strange necklace he'd lifted from Adipose Industries. He'd been at it for hours, soldering and cutting and muttering what sounded like gibberish to himself, or maybe to her. She couldn't tell sometimes. Rose was curled up on the jumpseat, a mug of tea in one hand and a book in the other. She was reading Dickens—*A Tale of Two Cities*. It was one of her favorites, but she liked it better when he read to her. He had a way of talking that imitated the characters to perfection, like she was in the middle of a real conversation.

"Oh, that's brilliant!" he exclaimed. She uncurled and stretched, a bit stiff from her extended stay.

"What is it, then?"

"Seems to be a bioflip digital stitch, designed specifically to target fat." He blinked at her, the goggles he wore making his eyes huge.

She looked at him blankly. "What's that when it's at home?"

"It's like, like an on switch," he said slowly. "It gives an order, and the fat obeys."

She leaned in to examine the bits spread out over the console. "What kind of order?"

The Doctor grinned and pushed the goggles up over his forehead and into his hair. "That's what we're going to find out."
Donna gaped at the thing in front of her. It was grayish-white, with black eyes and a tiny mouth. It was also all that remained of Stacey Campbell. It waved to her, and then dropped out the window. She bolted from the room.

"Doctor!" Rose's voice crackled from the comlink he wore like a Bluetooth. "I've got one! Energy signature plain as you like, about two blocks away. It was steady for about a minute, and then vanished."

"Roger that," he replied, and turned to the young man he'd been interviewing. "Thanks for your time, Adipose Industries is grateful for your business, ta!" He pulled a three-pronged device out of his pocket and took off down the street.

He lost the trail about five minutes in. "Rose," he said as he shook his tracking device vigorously, "any sign of another spike?"

"No, sorry Doctor. It's been all quiet since."

He sighed. "Right. I'm coming home, then." He paused. "Any chance of tea?" he asked hopefully.

When she responded, he could hear the smile in her voice. "I'll put the kettle on."

Donna stood in the alleyway and stared after the mysterious, unmarked black van that had all but vanished down the street. Elation battled confusion and worry. She was right! She knew it! Adipose Industries was hiding something—tiny little aliens! But where did Stacey go? A chilling thought stole over her. What if, what if that little white thing was Stacey? It had been less than a minute between when she cried for help and when Donna managed to get into the bathroom. She couldn't have gone far, not even if she went out the window, and her clothes and jewelry were lying on the floor! What did she do, run out naked? No. No, it was worse than that. Something was rotten in Adipose Industries, and she was going to find out what it was. And maybe, if she was very lucky, she'd find the Doctor too.

Mrs. Foster sat back in her chair, her eyes fixed on the screen in front of her. "It seems we have a case of industrial espionage," she mused. The two young men standing behind her said nothing. They stared ahead, one hand always resting on the gun each wore holstered to his side. "One touch and the capsule bio-tunes to its owner, but someone," she paused as she slipped her glasses on and settled them on the bridge of her nose, "someone must have introduced a second, raw capsule." The screen in front of her flickered, displaying CCTV footage from earlier. "Which means that one of these people is a thief." She studied the images, and then pressed a button on the remote. "There!" she said sharply, a smile forming on her face. "There she is."

The Doctor sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Rose, I would feel better if you were here in the TARDIS."

"That's tough," she replied as she laced her trainers. "I'm going with you."

"But what if those energy spikes show up again? How am I going to track them if you're with me?"

She frowned at him. "That's not why you want me to stay, and you know it. Ever since the Titanic you're acting like I'm going to disappear on you if you let me through those doors." She nodded at the TARDIS. "I'm not made a' glass, I'm not some damsel in distress. I can take care of myself. And besides, who's gonna take care of you if I'm stuck here?" She sat up and grabbed his hand. "We're a
team, Doctor," she reminded him. "No leaving me behind."

He nodded. "Right. Sorry."

She smiled at him. "I'll forgive you this once, as long as you promise not to do it again."

He nodded, but said nothing. He wouldn't lie to her, not out loud, at least. If he had to, if he was dying or he knew for certain that she would, he would not hesitate to send her away. "Right then, let's go." He grinned.

Rose looked around the maintenance closet. "Here," she said. "We're hiding in here. For how long?"

The Doctor checked his watch. "Ooh, a few hours. Have to wait until everyone's gone home, after all. Wouldn't do to run into stray employees that might recognize me from two days ago."

"You mean like that sales girl?" Rose asked, an edge in her voice.

The Doctor paused. He'd heard that tone before, from Martha, whenever he brought her somewhere he'd taken Rose, or occasionally when he mentioned her. He blinked. Was Rose jealous? Of a sales girl he used as a source of information? "What?"

She leaned against the cement wall of the closet. It was tiny, especially after the TARDIS. There was hardly enough room for the two of them and the mop and bucket that sat in the corner. "The sales girl. The one who gave you her phone number. She'd recognize you, wouldn't she?"

He tilted his head to the side. "I suppose so." Realization dawned on him. Right, the phone number. He reached into his pocket and pulled it out. "I didn't get a chance to throw this away yet," he said as casually as he could. Then he dropped it on the floor. "Pockets are already cluttered enough, don't need that in there adding to it." She relaxed a bit, but her arms were still crossed defensively over her chest. He sighed. "Rose. Are you really that jealous of her?"

She blushed and looked away. "No, suppose not. I just—I just forget sometimes."

"Forget what?"

"How much of a flirt you are," she responded with a half-smile.

He paused, thinking. Then he put his hands on her arms. "I am, a flirt I mean, but I don't mean it, not really, not with her anyway."

He moved one hand to lift her chin, forcing her to look at him. "I mean it with you. Always have, but it was easier to play it off that I didn't."

She swallowed and forced her eyes to meet his instead of drifting to his lips, as they were wont to do. "So, we're in a cupboard."

"Yep," he replied, popping the 'p.'

"For hours."

"Yep."

She raised an eyebrow. "What are we going to do to pass the time?"

He blinked. "Well, um, yes."

Then he pulled back abruptly and turned to face the opposite wall. "There's a computer core behind this wall. She's wired the whole building up."
"And?" Rose asked, baffled by his sudden shift in mood and attention.

He threw a grin over his shoulder at her. "I'm going to hack into it."

She sighed. "Perfect."

Donna shifted uncomfortably as she checked her phone for the millionth time. Almost there. Another half an hour and she could move again. The ladies wasn't her ideal hiding spot, she would have preferred and empty office, but beggars, or in her case alien-catchers, couldn't be choosers. Besides, as hiding spots went it wasn't all bad. People were only in there for a few minutes at a time, so no one would hang around long enough to notice that she'd been in there for a while. Plus, no security cameras in bathrooms. She wanted to stay as far off the grid as possible.

Her mother, of course, decided that now was the perfect time for a chat. Donna jumped as her phone rang. She'd turned it low, but in the quiet of the bathroom it sounded deafening.

"Not now!" she hissed. She waited, but there was no sign that anyone else was in the bathroom.

"I need the car," her mother replied. "Where are you?"

"I can't," Donna protested. "I'm busy." Busy investigating a case of alien intervention in the guise of a diet pill, she longed to say, but she knew that her mum would just think she'd finally gone mad. She'd rather believe that, Donna thought with a touch of bitterness, than believe that her daughter was in the middle of something incredibly important.

"Why are you whispering?"

She rolled her eyes. "I'm in church!"

"What are you doing in church?" Her mother's voice was mocking.

"Praying!" she snapped back.

"Bit late for that, madam."

"Donna's at church?" she could hear her granddad in the background.

"Go up the hill!" her mother snapped at him. She turned her attention back to Donna. "But I need the car," she said, her voice wheedling. "I'm going out with Suzette. She's asked all the Wednesday girls. Apparently she's been on those Adipose pills—says she looks marvelous."

The door to the bathroom slammed open and Donna snapped her phone closed. She pulled her legs up onto the toilet seat and stared at the door, eyes wide.

"We know you're in here," Mrs. Foster called. Donna could hear her heartbeat like a drum. Was it really that loud? Could Mrs. Foster hear it too? "Why don't you make this nice and easy and come out?" she continued.

Silence.

The woman sighed. "The hard way, then. Find her."

Someone was kicking the stall doors open. Every time a boot connected with a door Donna twitched. They were getting closer. She closed her eyes, waiting for her turn. They were going to find her. What would they do with her? They were aliens, after all, not subject to Earth police.
The kicking stopped. "There you are," Mrs. Foster said. Donna opened her eyes. Her door was still closed.

"I've read the results," another woman spat. Donna blinked. It was the reporter from the slideshow, the one who asked all the questions. "They've been faked. There's something about those pills you aren't telling us."

"Oh, I think I'll be conducting this interview, Penny," Mrs. Foster responded. "Take her away."

Donna waited several seconds after the door 'clicked' shut before she opened her stall and poked her head out. It was empty. She breathed a sigh of relief. She thought she was a goner back there. If she'd picked a stall closer to that end—no, best not to think about that. She needed to stay alert if she was going to avoid Foster and her goons.
If she was being completely honest with herself, Donna Noble would admit that over the past year she'd spent a sizeable chunk of time fantasizing about meeting the Doctor again. None of those fantasies included being chased by corporate goons with machine guns or hanging off the side of a building in a lift used to wash windows. In retrospect, she probably should have expected it. He was, after all, somewhat of a trouble magnet.

"What's your next brilliant idea, spaceman?" she cried. "She'll just reel us back up!"

"Not likely," the Doctor commented. "I put a sonic lock on the controls, and I very much doubt that she's got a sonic instrument.

He was wrong, as occasionally happened, even if he would never admit it. Mrs. Foster, flanked by two goons with guns, approached the controls. "He's slippery, that one," she said. "Let's see how he handles this." She pointed what looked like a pen at the dials and knobs. A strange humming sound filled the air and a faint blue light shone from the tip.

The car plummeted toward the ground. "I should have known!" Donna shrieked as she grabbed the side of the cart.

The Doctor gritted his teeth and thrust his sonic screwdriver at the lift. They jerked to a halt. "There," he said, breathing heavily. "May have misjudged them just a bit."

"Oh, do you think?" Donna snapped. "What are you doing now?"

He pressed a hand to his ear. "It's me. I need you to get to floor—" he glanced through the windows next to them, "thirty six." He paused. "We're in one of those carts they use to wash windows." He sighed. "It seemed like a good idea at the time. Yes, I know—she's got a sonic and I'm not sure how long I can hold her off." Another pause, then a grin. "See you soon."

"Who was that, then?" Donna asked, puzzled. Hearing one half of the conversation was almost less than helpful.

He turned his beaming grin on her. "The cavalry." She stared at him. His smile faded a bit. "You know, like in those old westerns? The cavalry swoops in and saves the good guys in the nick of time?"

"You. Are. Bonkers!" she yelled finally. "We're dangling a hundred feet off the ground and you're making pop culture references!"

"Well," he began, "it's more like two hundred and eighty eight feet," but Donna interrupted him.

"And now she's cutting the cable!"

"What?" He looked up, and sure enough, Mrs. Foster's sonic was pointed directly at one of the
cables. A spot just under the lift started to spark. The Doctor leaned back, took aim, and sent a quick prayer to gods he didn't believe in before he activated his screwdriver. His aim was true. Mrs. Foster cried out as her device sparked and she let it fall. The Doctor stretched his hand over the edge of the cart and caught it expertly.

He pressed his ear again. "Where are you? I managed to stop Foster but she's damaged the cable. I don't know how long it'll hold." He paused. "Right. Back at you."

"Well?" Donna asked.

"She's almost here." He turned his attention, and the sonic, on the windows.

"She?"

The Doctor ignored her and focused on the task at hand. After a moment he sighed and switched it off. "It's no use. She's deadlocked the building. It's the only thing the screwdriver won't open, well, that and wood," he explained. "Basically, we're stuck. There's no way in."

The window across from Donna slid open and a blonde head poked out. "Hello!" the gril said brightly to Donna. "I'll have you two out of there in a tick!"

The Doctor stared at her. "How did you do that? The whole building is deadlocked!"

She snorted. "Not from the inside. You are completely useless without me." She held out her hand to Donna. "Come on, then."

Donna stared at her. "And what, jump?"

The blonde nodded. "Don't worry, I'll catch you."

"You, catch me?" she asked incredulously. "I don't think so sunshine!"

"I'm stronger than I look!" the blonde snapped back. "And we really don't have time for this, now shift!"

Reluctantly, Donna clambered over the side of the car. True to her word, blondie pulled her in through the window. The girl grinned at her. "S amazing what life-or-death situations can do for your motivation," she quipped, and left Donna sitting on the floor with her back against the wall.

"Your turn, Doctor," the girl said, her head back out the window.

"Took you long enough to get here," he grumbled.

"Being rude again?" she asked tartly, but without anger. "Besides, the cavalry always arrives at the last possible moment. More dramatic that way."

Great, the so-called 'cavalry' was a blonde, early twenty-something girl. And where they—yes, they were definitely flirting. He was different from the last time she saw him—lighter. She wondered how long it had been for him. He didn't look older, but he was an alien. For all she knew he didn't age at all.

The cable gave out as the Doctor climbed through the window, and for a long moment he dangled half-in, half-out, but finally he managed to scramble through. Inertia carried him forward and he and the blonde ended up in a pile on the floor. They were tangled together; she was beneath him but his hand cradled her head. His other gripped her shoulder. One of her hands was fisted in his jacket
beside his lapel; the other was clenched around his arm just above the elbow.

"Blimey, she said, "you're heavier than you look, Doctor."

The Doctor grinned. "Solid muscle, me."

They were doing it again. They were flirting. Donna was suddenly and inexplicably angry. "Can we hold off the flirting until after we escape, thanks?" she asked tartly. The blinked at her. "Looks like you've moved on, spaceman. Didn't take you very long, did it? D'you remember how you were when we met? Because I do. I remember the look on your face when I found that jacket hanging over the railing." She glared at him as she stood and marched towards the door. He and the blonde untangled themselves and followed.

"Donna," he tried to interrupt, but she was going full steam.

"Don't you 'Donna,' me!" she snapped. "Did you even tell her about Rose? You know, the woman you lost before I met you? D'you remember that you couldn't even say her name without crying? Or did you just sweep in and put the universe at her feet? I know I told you to find someone, but she's what, nineteen, twenty? She should be at home with her mum, not risking her life 'cause you're lonely!"

"She's right here, you know," the girl commented.

"Not talking to you, blondie!"

"She sounds like your mother," the Doctor said to the girl.

"Oh, so you've met her mother. That's something at least. Didn't you meet Rose's family?"

"If you'll let me explain," he began, but she interrupted him.

"No need to explain, I just forgot that for all you're an alien, you're such a man."

That was the final straw. "Fingers on lips!" the Doctor shouted. The girl did so with a grin, like it was some kind of joke between them. Donna took a deep breath, preparing to tell him off for even attempting to do that to her, but he jumped on her momentary silence. "Donna Noble," he said, "meet Rose Tyler."

She blinked. The blonde smiled at her. "He's told me all about you, but I never thought I'd get to meet you!"

Donna turned to the Doctor. "Oh my god, like, 'her name is Rose?' That Rose?"

He rolled his eyes. "No, Donna, I just go kidnapping young blonde women named Rose. Of course that Rose!"

"You found her!" Donna couldn't believe it. Of course he was different—he had his missing piece back.

Rose shoved the Doctor with her elbow. "Rude," she chastised him. "And I found him. Actually, I found Martha. Had to follow her around for a year to get to this lump."

Donna hugged the girl. Rose was startled at first, but quickly returned it. "You were right," the older woman said as she released her. "He is completely useless without you."

"Oi!" the Doctor protested. "He's also right here!"
"So are they," Rose said, pointing behind Donna.

Mrs. Foster and her goons stood in the middle of the hallway that Rose, Donna, and the Doctor currently occupied. She took off her glasses, folded them, and placed them in the pocket of her jacket. "Well then," she said with a smile. "At last."

Donna gave her a small wave. "Hello, I'm Donna."

The Doctor bent forward with a grin, his hands behind his back. "Hello, I'm the Doctor, and this is Rose. Nice to meet you."

Mrs. Foster regarded them coldly. "Partners in crime, and apparently off-worlders, judging by your sonic technology."

"Oh, yes!" The Doctor patted his suit jacket. "I've still got your sonic pen. Very nice, very sleek, don't you think Rose?"

She nodded. "It is definitely sleek."

"And if you were to sign your real name?" the Doctor asked.

"Matron Cofelia of the five-straighten Classabindi nursery fleet—intergalactic class."

"A wet nurse?" Donna asked. The Doctor nodded.

"Using humans as surrogates," he supplied. His face darkened.

"I've been employed by the Adiposian first family to foster a new generation," the Matron replied. "There breeding planet was lost."

Rose frowned. "Lost? How do you lose a planet?"

The Matron smiled. "Oh, the politics are none of my concern, I'm here for the children."

"Like an outerspace supermanny?" Donna asked.

"Yes, if you like." The Matron's face brightened at the association.

"So those little things," Donna continued, "they're made out of fat. But that woman—Stacey Campbell—there was nothin' left of her."

"In a crisis the Adipose can convert all sorts of tissue—bones and internal organs, etc. It makes them a little bit sick, the poor things," the Matron said.

"What about poor Stacey?" Donna took a step forward, outrage evident in her voice.

"Seeding a level five planet is against galactic law." The darkness was back in the Doctor's face and voice.

"Are you threatening me?" the Matron asked, one eyebrow raised.

"I'm trying to help you, Matron," the Doctor responded. "This is your one chance. And if you don't take it, I'll have to stop you."

"I hardly think you can stop bullets." Her face was a blank mask again. "Kill them," she said to her goons. The men took aim.
"Wait, wait wait wait!" the Doctor cried.

The Matron raised an eyebrow. "What did you expect me to do, let you go, Doctor? The wolf is at the door. Desperate times call for desperate measures."

"Yes, of course not, but! Do you know what happens when you hold two identical sonic devices against each other?"

Rose was looking at him like he was insane. Donna was still staring at the guns. The Matron took a deep breath, her lips a thin line in her face. "No," she said finally.

The Doctor grinned. "Nor me. Let's find out!" He pointed the sonic pen and the sonic screwdriver at each other, and activated them. Pulsing noise enveloped them. Donna had her hands over her ears as the noise pulsed. Her eyes watered and it felt like her very bones were vibrating. The Matron and her goons had been unprepared, and collapsed. The Doctor looked to be in much the same situation as Donna. She shoved the Doctor and he switched the devices off.

He grabbed her hand. "Run!"

They ended up outside the maintenance closet. The Doctor began shifting the cleaning supplies while Rose and Donna watched. "That's one solution," the older woman commented, "hiding in a cupboard. Are you sure the three of us will fit?"

"I'm not sure the Doctor and his ego will fit," Rose grumbled. Donna laughed.

"Rose Tyler, I like you."

Rose grinned. "I like you too, Donna Noble. It's a shame you didn't go with him. He could have used someone to keep him in line."

"Oi!" the Doctor protested. "I had Martha, and she was brilliant!"

"And completely infatuated with you," Rose replied. "She let you get away with murder." Donna's eyebrows rocketed up. "Not literally," Rose reassured her. "But she let him walk all over her."

"So where's Miss Martha now?"

The Doctor paused. "At home. With her family." His voice said that there was more to the story, but Donna knew better than to pry. He'd say eventually.

"Right, so what are you doing with all that?" She motioned at the cupboard. Rose rolled her eyes.

"She's got a computer core running through the center of the building," the Doctor replied. "I've been hacking into it all day, but now I've got her sonic pen, so I can get past the triple-deadlock."

"But what's it for?" He might be a nine-hundred plus year old alien with the biggest brain in the universe, but she was a human being. And he could stand to explain a little more.

"As near as we can figure, it's an inducer," Rose answered. "The capsules—those necklace things, work on a small scale to create the little fat people. This thing is like that, only bigger. If she activates it—" the girl faltered.

"If she activates the machine then emergency partheogenisis will occur," the Doctor said quietly. "And one million people will turn into Adipose."
"They'll die," Donna clarified. "Like Stacey—she just sort of dissolved into those thing."

The Doctor nodded, his back to them, his attention on the inducer. "We need a bit of privacy for this."

Rose grinned. "I can take care of that."

"But they've got guns!" Donna protested.

Something in Rose's face shifted and Donna was forced to reevaluate her estimation of the girl's age. For just a moment she saw something of the Doctor in her eyes—something ancient and golden and timeless. Then the girl reached into her pocket and pulled out something slim and shiny. "So do I," she said, and ducked out the door.

"And you're just going to let her swan off?" Donna asked the Doctor.

"Rose can take care of herself," he replied. "Right now I need to focus on this."

"She's got a gun!"

"Psychic energy," he said, still studying the machine.

"What does that even mean?" Donna asked, exasperated.

"Phasers set to stun," he replied.

Rose returned a few minutes later. "Knocked 'em out and tied 'em up," she said. "How's it going?"

"She's started the cycle," the Doctor replied.

The machine beeped. "Inducer activated," a metallic voice said.

"Well, stop it!" Rose said.

"I am trying," he responded as he flashed the sonic pen at it. For a moment it looked like he had done it, but then the machine beeped again. "She's doubled the strength!" He straightened, clutching his hair with one hand; the other held the sonic pen with white-knuckle force.

"Doctor," Rose's voice was calm as she stepped closer to him. Donna was forced to back almost out of the tiny closet. "What does that mean?"

"I've got to cancel the signal. The capsules have a primary signal—if I can switch it off then the fat becomes fat again. But I only have one capsule—one signal!"

"What do you need?" Donna asked, also calm. Wouldn't do to have everyone losing their cool at once.

"I can't do it." The Doctor looked at Rose, wide-eyed. "I can't stop it."

"Doctor!" Donna's voice was sharp. "What do you need."

"Another capsule," he replied absently. "But there isn't time——"

Donna reached into her jacket pocket where she'd stashed the necklace she'd stolen from Adipose Industries two days ago. "You mean like this?"
Joy chased shock and awe across his face. "Oh, Donna Noble, you are brilliant!" he crowed. Rose laughed as he grabbed the capsule from her and plugged it into the inducer. "Just a quick application of the sonic, and—yes!" The machine beeped twice, and then went dark. The Doctor hugged Donna first, and then swept Rose up in his arms, still laughing. "Brilliant! You are both brilliant!"

Donna blinked at him, shocked. "Is he always like this now?" she asked Rose, who had stopped laughing but was grinning from ear to ear.

"Everyone lives, Donna!" the Doctor said. "I never get days like this!"

A deep rumbling roar interrupted their rejoicing. "What's the hell is that?" Donna asked.

The Doctor glanced at the ceiling. "Mum and Dad have come for the kids." The inducer beeped again, and the screen lit up. Strange glyphs flashed across. The Doctor frowned as he studied it.

"Oh," he said. "Instructions from the Adiposian first family." His eyes widened. "We need to get to the roof."

"Why?" Rose, still in the circle of his arms, asked.

"She's rigged the inducer up to act as a levitation post as well, and we're not the ones in trouble anymore." He pocketed the sonic pen and whirled away from the inducer. "She is. Allons-y!"

The view from the roof was one of the strangest things that Rose Tyler had ever seen, and as she'd travelled with the Doctor for two years and then spent almost two hundred either working for Torchwood or jumping through space, time, and the occasional parallel world, that was saying a lot. Pillars of blue light stretched from the ground to a huge spaceship floating overhead. Tiny fat people—Adipose—drifted upwards in the light.

"There must be thousands," she murmured.

"Oh yes," the Doctor replied, staring at them.

"What are you gonna do the," Donna asked, "blow them up?"

The Doctor and Rose looked at her like she'd grown a second head. "They're just children," he replied. "They can't help where they came from."

"That makes a change from last time," she noted. "That Martha must have done you good."

He sniffed. "She did, yeah. She did." He shot her a sidelong look. "She fancied me."

Donna laughed. "Mad Martha—that one." Then she glanced over at Rose, standing on the Doctor's other side, their hands intertwined. "Then again, Mad Rose."

"Absolutely barmy," the other woman agreed.

One of the Adipose in the levitation beam waved at them, and the three people waved back.

Donna let out a little laugh. "I'm waving at fat."

"A day in the life," Rose responded, smiling.

The last of the Adipose vanished into the ship, and Matron Cofelia appeared, hovering just above the
"Matron Cofelia!" the Doctor called, rushing to the edge. "Listen to me!"

"Oh, I don't think so Doctor," she replied. "And if I never see you again it'll be too soon."

"Why does no one ever listen?" he muttered. "Can you shift the levitation beam? Can you get over to the roof?"

"Whatever for?"

He groaned. "Matron, the Adipose know that seeding a level five planet is illegal, so what do they do now? They get rid of their accomplice."

"But I'm so much more than that, Doctor." He rolled his eyes at her placid words. "I'm nanny to all these children."

"Yes, but Mum and Dad have the kids now. They don't need you anymore!"

Horrified realization dawnced on her, but before she could move the blue light flickered, and died. For a second she hung suspended in the air, and then she dropped like a stone. Donna turned away and the Doctor pulled Rose to him, trying to shield her from what he knew (from experience) happened to a living body when it contacted concrete from such a height.
The Doctor dropped Matron Cofelia's sonic pen in a nearby bin. He'd melted all the interesting bits with his own sonic screwdriver and now it was just a pen that didn't work. His eyes wandered to the police cordon that hid the Matron's broken body from view. It had been going so well—until she refused to listen. They never listened.

A woman singing cut through his thoughts. He looked at Rose, who jumped. "Sorry, that's me," she said and answered her cell phone. "It's Jack," she mouthed at the Doctor, who nodded. "Hello you! Oh, yes. No, we sorted it." She wandered away, conversing animatedly.

"Jack?" Donna asked.

The Doctor rolled his eyes. "Old friend. He used to travel with us in the early days. He's got a bit of a team in Cardiff and they look out for stuff like this."

"Alien stuff?" she clarified.

He nodded. "They're all that's left of Torchwood."

Donna gasped. "The people behind the battle of Canary Wharf?"

He looked at her sharply. "You've changed, Donna Noble. The last time I saw you, you had no idea what Canary Wharf was. And what are you doing chasing after dangerous aliens?" he asked. "I thought you were going to travel the world."

She sniffed. "Easier said than done." She stared off into the distance for a while. "It's like—I had that one day with you and I was gonna change, I really was. But then I woke up the next morning and it was like you were never there. Same old life, same old world. I tried, I did. Went to Egypt—but it's nothing like traveling with you. I must have been daft to turn down your offer."

"Hmm?"

"The offer to go with you," she reminded him.

"Oh, yes, right. That offer." He watched Rose, who was laughing at something that Jack said. "It still stands, you know."

"What?" She couldn't have heard that right.

"The offer to come with." He turned to look at her then. "Because Rose is back, and that's brilliant," the warmth in his voice made her smile, "but it would be nice to have a mate aboard."

She blinked. "You want to mate? Well hate to break it to you, but you're not mating with me sunshine! Go ask Rose, I'm sure she'd say yes!"

"Oh." She straightened her jacket, pretending to think about it. "Well, then sure. I'd love to come."

Rose flipped the phone shut, and wandered over to where the two of them were standing. She slipped the phone into her pocket, grabbed the lapels of the Doctor's jacket, and planted a firm kiss on his lips. He blinked at her. "What was that for?" he asked when she let him go.

She smiled mischievously. "That was from Jack. He said you're supposed to give me one from him, or he could do it in person." She tilted her head to the side. "Are we due for a refuel any time soon?"

"Er, not really," the Doctor said as he ruffled his hair. "Topped her off just before the Year that Never Was. She's got a good six or seven months left at least."


"Oi!" The Doctor grumbled. "I'm making an effort not to be offended."

She rolled her eyes. "You know very well that I think you're gorgeous too. But with Jack it's not opinion, it's fact."

Donna was intrigued. "Oh, really? Maybe we should visit him."

The Doctor put up his hands. "Later. I promise we will visit Jack and his band of merry men—women—people—later. Now we've got to get Donna settled on the TARDIS."

"So you're coming?" Rose asked her.

"Of course! As long as I'm not interfering with you two." The ginger woman was fairly bursting with excitement. "I've been ready for this for ages! I'm packed and everything!"

"You're smarter than me," the younger woman commented. "First time I went with the Doctor I had nothing but the clothes on my back."

As the Doctor lugged two of Donna's five large suitcases into the TARDIS he wished that she was a little more impulsive. Where on Earth, well, TARDIS, was she going to put all these clothes? And why would she need them? The Wardrobe was full of perfectly acceptable clothing for every occasion. More interesting than her apparent abundance of attire was the location of Donna's car. She had parked it a few feet away from where the TARDIS had materialized. She'd mentioned 'destiny,' but in the Doctor's experience 'destiny' was the result of someone meddling. There were no more Time Lords, which meant that if anyone was interfering it was an amateur. He didn't fancy cleaning up any more paradoxes, especially now that Rose was back.

He glanced through the open TARDIS doors at Rose who was following behind him, one of Donna's suitcases in each hand. "Blimey," she muttered. "Does she have enough clothes?"

"I'm not sure she ever will," the Doctor replied. Rose laughed.

"Too true. Good thing I'm more of a shoe girl myself."

He quirked an eyebrow. "Really? I've only ever seen you in trainers."

"That's 'cause I'm usually running for my life," she responded dryly. "Stiletto heels are not appropriate companion wear."
They dropped the suitcases on the console room floor. "Let her pick her own room," the Doctor instructed. He took Rose's hand and led her to the jumpseat. "You're more than a companion," he said softly as he traced a design on the back of her hand with his thumb. "You have been for a very long time. It just—took me a bit to realize it." He smiled deprecatingly. "Bit slow on the uptake, me."

She smiled back at him, her tongue between her teeth. "But you're a fast learner."

He chuckled. "I am, at that." His free hand brushed against her cheek as he tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear and then slipped around the back of her head. He brushed his lips against hers, feather-light, a world of questions in a touch. She laced her fingers through his hair and pulled him closer to her, deepening the kiss. He let go of her hand and settled his arm at her waist, his fingers tracing the edge of her jeans. She could feel his pulse quicken, the double-beat of his hearts an exotic rhythm against her chest, where her own beat a harmony.

Donna Noble strode down the street, her mother's car keys in hand and her phone against her ear. "I saw it Mum, I know, tiny fat people." She glanced around and her eyes landed on a rubbish bin attached to one of the streetlights. "Look, I've gotta go. I'm staying with Veena for a bit."

"But it was in the sky!" her mother protested, still caught up in the events of the past few hours.

Donna smiled to herself. "Yeah, I know—spaceship. But I've still got the car keys," She dropped them into the bin. "There's this bin, on Brook street, about thirty feet from the corner. I'm gonna leave them in there."

"In a bin?" her mother's voice climbed an octave.

"Yes Mum, a bin."

"But you can't do that!"

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, stop complaining. The car's just a bit down the road. Gotta go—I've really gotta go. Love you, bye."

"But Donna, you ca—" she closed the phone, cutting her mother off. A woman standing by the police blockade caught Donna's eye, and she approached her. "Look, there's this woman gonna come along, blonde, older, named Sylvia. You just tell her," Donna pointed at the bin, "that bin there. Thanks!" Then she turned, and ran back toward the TARDIS.

The woman looked at the bin, and then after Donna. Startling blue eyes gazed out of a tan face framed by sandy-blonde curls. She was tall for a woman, and made taller by the sleek black boots she wore. A gray leather jacket hid a deep blue blouse and black pants were tucked into the tops of her boots. She touched a hand to her ear. "Control, we've located the Doctor, but it's too early. Donna Noble has just joined them. Jumping in five." She let her hand fall, and strode into the night. After five steps a flash of blue light lit the alley, and she was gone.
For a moment, as she lay in her bed between sleeping and waking, Donna Noble thought she was back at home, on Earth, living the same life she'd been living for the past year. And then she opened her eyes. The lights faded on slowly, allowing her eyes to become accustomed without pain. She grinned. She was on the TARDIS. With the Doctor and Rose. Traveling through space and time. She glanced at the clock hanging on the wall. Eight in the morning, well, the relative morning, as the Doctor was fond of informing her that there was no morning on the TARDIS.

Someone knocked on her door. "What is it?" she called.

"You up?" Rose's voice drifted through from the other side. "Breakfast in the kitchen!"

"Be there in a bit!" she responded, and rolled out of bed. She dug around in the large closet the TARDIS thoughtfully provided and selected an appropriate outfit, and then it was off to the ensuite for a shower.

She paused just outside the kitchen. Voices mingled and danced in the air—the Doctor and Rose were about. She peeked around the corner, and smiled. The Doctor was making pancakes. Rose stood next to him, holding a plate. With a practiced heave and twist of the wrist he sent the pancake tumbling through the air, and Rose positioned the plate below, catching it deftly. For all of the marvelously alien thing she'd seen, life on the TARDIS had moments that were so completely domestic that they seemed stranger than the fact that the ship was grown, not built, and sentient, and dimensionally transcendent.

"Oh, those look lovely," she said as she entered the kitchen proper. The Doctor waved a quick hello and Rose smiled at her.

"Best pancakes in the galaxy," the Doctor said proudly. "There's a secret ingredient."

"Is it a banana?" Rose asked.

"If I told you it wouldn't be secret," he reminded her. "Are you two ready for an adventure?"

"Let me get a few of those pancakes and I'll be ready for anything," Donna replied.

"So," the Doctor said after breakfast was eaten and dishes were done. "How do you feel about Ancient Rome?"

"Really?" Donna asked, her eyes bright. "I'd love to!" She paused. "Hold on a tick, is there an alien menace threatening Rome right now?"

The Doctor shook his head. "Nope. Just one of the most vibrant cities in history. When they said 'all roads lead to Rome,' they meant it."
Rose poked the Doctor. "I'm not going to get turned to stone again, am I?"

He blinked. "Ah. Right. We'll arrive after Hadrian built his wall. Don't want to run into our past selves, now do we?"

"Turned to stone?" Donna exclaimed.

"I turned her back!" the Doctor replied.

"Yeah, and then you got yourself made stone and I had to fix you up," Rose pointed out. "Like I said before, completely useless."

"If you're quite done," the Doctor huffed, "I thought you might show Donna the Wardrobe."

She glanced at her outfit. "What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

"Nothing," Rose replied. "if we're visiting the 21st century or later, but you'd stick out like a sore thumb in Ancient Rome." She turned to the Doctor. "Are you going to change?"

He wrinkled his nose. "Why? I think I look dashing!"

She rolled her eyes. "Some things never change." She stood. "Come on, Donna. Fancy playing dress up?"

"D'you remember the way?" the Doctor called after them.

Rose paused. "Has she moved it?"

He shook his head. "First left, second right, third on the left, go straight ahead, under the stairs, past the bins, fifth door on your left."

Donna was out of breath by the time they reached the Wardrobe. "Blimey!" she gasped. "You weren't kidding when you said this ship was huge!"

Rose grinned. "Nope." She laid a hand on the smooth coral wall and the lights pulsed faintly. "But she's helpful. If you're lost, just tell her where you're trying to go. Took me ages to find this place my first time." She snorted. "I got all dressed up and the Doctor changed his jumper."

Donna raised an eyebrow. "He wears jumpers?"

Rose shook her head. "Not anymore. It was a while ago." There was more to it, Donna could tell, but she let it drop.

"So, what do we wear in Ancient Rome?" she asked instead.

The lights brightened two stories up and three rows down. Rose grinned. "Something that way, I'd bet."

The Doctor danced around the console, flipping switches and pulling levers. He wanted to take them somewhere impressive, somewhere they could submerge themselves in the history and forget about the pesky things clouding the present, like ghosts of old enemies and questions unanswered.

Let the human die, and I will live.
He pushed the memories back into their box. Later. He would deal with that later. What had he told Rose all that time ago, back on Platform one? Here and now. That's it. Here and now and this is me. This is us; he corrected himself with a smile. His eyes wandered to the door leading out of the console room. They'd been gone for ages—twenty three minutes seven, eight, nine seconds. What was it with women and clothes? He looked down at his pale blue shirt and swirling blue tie. He looked rather dashing, he thought. And besides, it was Rome. Anything went, like Soho but bigger. Show up wearing clothing that wouldn't be invented for several centuries and humans just thought you were from across the pond. He chuckled. Oblivious, they were, sometimes to a fault, but it was charming in its own way. Made his job a hell of a lot easier.

The door opened and Donna and Rose swished in. Donna was wearing a purple dress with short sleeves. Her long ginger hair—a perpetual source of jealousy for the Doctor—was pulled back from her face by a clip in the shape of a shell. She wrapped a swath of purple fabric around her like a shawl. Rose's dress was pale blue and sleeveless. Gold clips held the two sides together on her shoulders and a chain caught the dress just below her breasts. Her blonde hair hung loose and framed her face in a wave of gold.

"You look lovely," he said, eying her appreciatively. She blushed faintly.

"For a human?" she asked.

He shook his head. "For anything." Donna cleared her throat, and he blinked. "And you look nice too," he said.

She sniffed. "Thanks, spaceman. Now, are we going to Ancient Rome or not?"

The Doctor took his place at the console and grinned. "Donna Noble, hold on to your hat!"

"Not wearing one!" she called back.

He rolled his eyes and threw the final lever. They were off.

"Ancient Rome!" the Doctor declared as he thrust the TARDIS doors open and led them out. "Well, not to them. For all intents and purposes this is brand-new Rome."

"It's so—Roman!" Donna said breathlessly as they wandered through the streets. They were in a market district. Shops lined the broad walkways. People bustled past; women pulled bored looking children behind them, young men loitered in corners, vendors hawked their wares.

Rose looked around. "It's a sight nicer than our last visit. That was a bit of a dodgy neighborhood."

"So how did you get turned to stone?" Donna's curiosity got the better of her.

"Accident, really," Rose replied. "People in the future created this thing, called it a G.E.N.I.E, to grant wishes. But a girl was near it and wished she could be in Ancient Rome. It had to grant her wish, so it brought her here. Then Ursus found it." She shivered. "He wanted to be able to sculpt, but talking to the G.E.N.I.E. required precision. He said he wanted to make beauty in stone—he meant carving, but the G.E.N.I.E. made it so if he touched someone they turned to stone."

"He touched you," Donna said. Rose nodded.

"My fault, really." That was the Doctor. He walked on the other side of Rose, her hand firmly in his. "I wanted to see inside his studio, and the only way to do that was for Rose to be his model." His face was taut.
"You sorted it." She squeezed his hand. "And then you made me a statue." She smiled at him, her tongue between her teeth. "How many girls can say that, eh?"

"Oi, you two!" Donna was glaring at them. "That sign over there is in English. You're not having me on, are you? We're not in Epcot or sommat like that?"

"Nah, that's the TARDIS translation circuit," the Doctor replied, the tension fading from his expression. "Gets in your head and translates languages, text too. You're speaking Latin right now."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously," Rose replied.

Donna was quiet for a moment. "But, what happens if I say something that's actually in Latin? What if I tell someone 'Veni Vidi Vichi'?"

The Doctor blinked. "Dunno. Never tried it."

"Nine hundred years and you were never curious?" Rose asked.

"I have had more important things on my mind," he protested.

"I'm going to go find out," Donna declared, and wandered over to a merchant.

"Hello love," he said. She noted with amusement that he sounded like he was from London. "What can I do for you?"

"Veni, Vidi, Vichi," she replied.

He frowned. "Me no speak Celtic," he finally said, loudly and slowly with accompanying hand-gestures, as if he was talking to an idiot. "No can do, missy."

Donna gave him a long look. "Yeah," she said, and walked away. The Doctor and Rose were grinning. "What was that bit about 'celtic'?" she asked.

"Welsh, Donna," the Doctor replied. "You sound like you're speaking Welsh." He grinned. "There we are; learned something." Rose giggled and that made it all worth it, because this was their life and they ran because if they stopped moving than the ghosts of Christmas past would catch up to them and they would end up sitting in the shower, trying to wash the blood off of their hands. But he would think about that later, when the inevitable happened. Now he was here, and she was here, and he was going to enjoy it while it lasted. He was looking at her, and did not notice the woman in red watching them from the shadows, her eyes wide in her pale face.

He glanced around at the sky, his expression puzzled. "Something's off—the coliseum, the circus maximus, the pantheon, they should all be looming. So where are they?" He pulled Rose into a side street. Donna followed. "This way!" The woman in red trailed them, making sure to keep to the shadows. Ordinary people shied away from her, watching her with a cross between fear and respect.

They stopped in a large square. The Doctor scanned the sides and Rose kept close to him, but Donna moved forward, her eyes on something distant. "Doctor," she said. "I'm no expert, but weren't there seven hills of Rome?"

"Yep," he replied, still looking. Rose glanced up, and saw what Donna was talking about. She tugged on the Doctor's hand and he looked up.
"So," Donna continued. "Why is there only one?"

He strode next to her. A rumble like thunder, but louder filled the air as the earth shook. Pottery crashed and shelves tipped, but the people seemed unphased. They stood in doorways or held up storefronts or shielded objects, and when the tremors passed life continued as it had before. The Doctor's eyes were wide. "Got the flight a bit wrong, I'm afraid," he said. "This isn't Rome. It's Pompeii—and it's volcano day."

The woman in red ran through the city. The box, the blue box was here. She barely paused at the door to the temple. "I seek audience with the high priestess of the Sybilline!" she cried as she dropped to her knees and pressed her forehead to the cold stone floor.

Three priestesses turned to face her. The one in front bid her to rise, but refused her entrance. "The high priestess may not be seen." They drew nearer to their sister priestess still kneeling on the floor. "What would you tell her?"

"The box," she gasped out, still winded from her run. "It has come, as foretold in the prophecy! The blue box has arrived!"

The Doctor sprinted through the streets, dragging Rose along with him. Donna followed close behind. Why, why did the TARDIS bring him here? Everyone in this city would be dead tomorrow. Burnt alive. Images of another planet burning filled his mind. He pushed them away but their echoes seemed to waver and dance before his eyes, like a mirage. They had to get out, they had to go, now. The rhythm of life that beat around him served as a macabre taunt in the face of what was to come. The would burn. All of them would burn.

Finally they reached the TARDIS, but when he drew back the scrap of cloth that concealed it only emptiness met his gaze. He froze. It was gone. His TARDIS was gone.

"Oh, you're kidding me!" Donna growled. "Don't tell me the TARDIS has disappeared!"

"Okay," he said, his mind trying furiously to process what had happened. He could feel her still—she was alive, but nowhere to be seen.

"Well then where is it?" Donna demanded.

"You told me not to tell you," he replied.

Rose pulled him to the side. She let go of his hand and cupped his face, forcing him to look down at her. "Breathe, Doctor," she instructed. "You're going to hyperventilate."

He shook his head, but did as she said. "Time Lords don't hyperventilate. Superior biology."

She rolled her eyes. "Sure. Now. Explain."

He took a deep breath. "Right. This is Pompeii."

Her lips quirked into a smile. "Yeah, got that."

He rolled his eyes. "I can't explain if you keep interrupting me."

"Sorry."

He glanced around. "I make it 23rd of August, 79 A.D, which means Vesuvius erupts tomorrow."
"Well, that's plenty of time!" Donna cried.

The Doctor shot her a look. "For what?"

"To start the evacuation," she replied as if it was obvious. "That's plenty of time—we could get everyone out easy!"

"Yeah, except we're not going to," he snapped back.

"What?" Her voice was heavy with confusion.

"Donna, the eruption of Vesuvius and destruction of the city of Pompeii is a fixed point in time," the Doctor said quietly, urgently. "It literally has to happen. It always does; it always will."

She blinked at him. "So you're just going to stand back and let all these people die?"

"No," he responded. "I'm going to find the TARDIS and then we're leaving."

"Says who?"

"Says me," he replied.

She glared at him. "What, you're in charge now?"

He returned her stare. "TARDIS, Time Lord, yeah."

She made a face. "Donna, human, no."

"Stop it, just stop it!" The both turned to stare at Rose, who was standing next to the Doctor, her arms crossed over her chest. "You sound like children. Now, Doctor, explain about fixed points in time, and Donna, please listen."

The Doctor ran a hand through his hair as he took a moment to regain his control. "Most of time is in flux. It's like an ocean—shifting, moving, and the timelines run through it like currents. But some things, some things are like coral reefs—they're solid, immobile. Those are fixed points. If you change one then time dies. It decays and instead of a few thousand people being killed by a volcano you have the entire universe ceasing to exist." He blew a harsh breath out through his mouth. "I can't do that, Donna. I can't have the entire universe on my conscience, and who knows if it would affect parallel worlds? Maybe all of existence would come to a screeching halt."

"But there has to be something we can do!" Donna argued.

The Doctor went to answer, but Rose put a hand on his arm. She shook her head sadly. "I'm sorry, but there's not. There's really not."

"Now," his voice was harsh, "we need to find the TARDIS."

Lobus Caecilius hurried the workmen away from his latest purchase—a blue wooden box. His wife looked on disapprovingly as he positioned it against the wall.

"What is it?" she asked. It was sitting in the middle of their beautiful villa. It looked nothing like their other sculptures. It was—odd.

"Modern art!" he declared proudly.
She sighed. "A great big waste of space is more like it."

He moved away from his treasure to take his wife in his arms. "We're moving up in the world, my love." He smiled at her, searching her eyes for some sign of approval. "Lucius Dexterous himself is coming to our house. And Evelina is about to be elevated—"

"Dad, don't make a fuss," their daughter said as she entered the room.

Metella tutted. "If we'd moved to Rome she could have been a Vestal Virgin."

"Did someone mention Vestal Virgins?" A young man asked, his voice rich with innuendo.

"Quintus!" his mother snapped. "Don't be so rude. Apologize to the household gods!" Quintus rolled his eyes, but he complied. Caecilius gasped as the ground trembled and bucked.

"Positions!" he cried. They raced around the room, stabilizing statues and ceramics. A handsome bust of the emperor waved, and would have fallen, but a strangely dressed man caught it and set it back upright gently. Two women followed him, one with bright red hair, and the other with blonde. The blonde stood close to the strange man and laced her fingers with his.

The strange man grinned at them. "There you go."

"Thank you, kind sir," Caecilius said, "but I'm afraid business is closed today. I'm expecting a visitor."

The man nodded. "That's me! I'm a visitor." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded bit of leather. He flashed the thing at Caecilius. "Spartacus, Marble inspector."

The other man blinked. "Oh, yes. And your lovely companions?"

"This is my wife, Rose," the Doctor responded, "and our friend Donna." The lie rolled easily off his tongue—too easily.

"An inspection!" Caecilius's wife grabbed a glass of wine from Quintus. "I do apologize for my son."

"Oi!" he protested in vain.

"This is my wife, Metella," Caecilius forged on. "I must confess we're not prepared for an inspection…"

The Doctor sniffed. "Oh, I don't think you have anything to worry about. I'm sure you've got nothing to hide, although," he nodded at the TARDIS, "that looks rather like wood to me."

Metella shot a look at her husband. "I told you to get rid of it."

The Doctor ran a hand over the smooth panels of the door. "I'm sure it's fine, but I'll have to take it off your hands for a proper inspection."

Donna narrowed her eyes. "Although, while we're here, wouldn't you recommend a holiday, Spartacus?"

He glared at her. "I have no idea what you're talking about, Donna."

She kept her voice light, but her eyes shot daggers at him. "This lovely family, mother, father, and son—don't you think they should get out of town?"
Metella and Caecilius looked confused. "Why would we do that?" he asked.

"The volcano, for starters," Donna began, but Rose put a hand on her arm.

"You'll have to excuse our friend," she said with a smile. "She isn't quite used to the bustle of the city." Donna glared at her, but Rose returned her stare evenly and she said nothing.

"For shame, Donna, Rose, we haven't greeted the household gods yet." The Doctor pulled them to a small altar hung on the wall. "These people don't know what a volcano is yet," he hissed. "They don't have a word for it. Vesuvius is just a mountain to them."

"Great," she replied. "They can learn a new word—while they die."

"Donna, stop it." Rose's face was pleasant, but her voice was firm.

"Oi! You two might be experienced time travelers and all, but that don't mean you can just tell me to shut up," she said with a great deal of heat. "That boy is sixteen, maybe, and tomorrow he burns to death."

"And that's my fault?" The Doctor's voice was quiet.

"Right now, yes!"

"Donna!" Rose's eyes flashed as she stepped between the other woman and the Doctor, who flinched as if he had been struck. She opened her mouth, but a servant interrupted her.

"Announcing Lucius Petrus Dexterous!" the young man called. "Chief Augur of the city government."

Caecilius and his family fawned over the puffed-up man who appeared behind the servant. His clothes were rich—ornamented with silver and gold, and he wore a cloak covering one side of his body completely. He also spoke in what sounded to Donna like gibberish.

"The birds are flying North and the wind is in the West," he said in greeting.

"And—that's good?" Caecilius responded.

Dexterous glanced at him scornfully. "Only the grain of wheat knows where it will grow." Rose rolled her eyes and Donna managed to contain a snicker. The Doctor remained impassive, but interested. He was leaning forward slightly, and Rose imagined that if he was a dog his ears would be perked up.

"Ah. Yes." Caecilius glanced at them. "Pardon me, sir, but I do have guests." Gestured for them to step forward. "This is Sparticus," he indicated the Doctor, "his wife Rose, and the lady Donna."

"A name is but a cloud upon a summer wind," Dexterous answered, dismissing them.

The Doctor's face lit up as he responded. "But the wind is felt most keenly in the dark."

Dexterous narrowed his eyes appraisingly. "Ah. But what is the dark other than an omen of the sun?"

"I concede that every sun must set," the Doctor said and scratched his ear.

"Hah!" Dexterous exclaimed.
"But," he continued, "the son of the father must also rise."

A small smile graced the sour man's features. "I see that you are a man of learning, sir."

The Doctor nodded. "But don't mind us. We'll be off over there." He motioned to the corner.

"I'm not going!" Donna hissed. The Doctor grabbed her arm at the elbow.

"You have to," Rose replied as they shuffled back toward the TARDIS.

"Well, I'm not!"

"Just this once, Donna," the Doctor growled, "listen to me."

Caecilius led Dexterous to a small table on the opposite side of the room. "It is ready, sir." A large, square object sat on the table, covered by a cloth. The Doctor glanced over as Caecilius removed the cloth. His eyes widened. The item in question was a square slab of marble in the shape of a computer circuit. "I crafted it to your exact specifications," the marble merchant continued. "It pleases you sir?"

"As rain pleases the soil."

The Doctor released Donna and ambled back into the main room. "Now that, that's something different. Who designed that, then?"

"Doctor," Rose murmured, "that looks like a computer chip."

"My lord Lucius was very specific."

"And where'd you get the pattern?" he pressed.

"On the rain and mist and wind," the Augur snapped.

"Do you mean you just dreamt that up?" Donna was not convinced.

Dexterous did not take kindly to her challenge of his authority. "That is my job, as city Augur," he replied coolly.

She was opened her mouth to let him know exactly how little that impressed her, but Rose poked her in the ribs and the Doctor stepped in front of her.

"You must excuse my friend," he said with a smile. "She's from—Barcelona." He turned back to Donna. "This is a time of superstition—official superstition," he whispered. "The city pays Dexterous to tell the future. 'The wind will blow from the west' is their version of the 12 o'clock news."

"They're laughing at us," a woman's voice floated through the air. They turned. Evelina stood unsteadily in the doorway. Her eyes were glassy and her face was very pale. She moved as if in a dream, jerky and halting. "Those three," she nodded at the Doctor, Rose, and Donna. "They use words like tricksters. They're mocking us."

"We meant no offense," Rose jumped in, glancing around. "But our friend is unfamiliar with the customs of the city."

Metella moved to Evelina's side, trying to lead her away. "I'm sorry, my daughter has been consuming the vapors." The girl waivered, but refused to move.
"I gather I have a rival in this house—someone else who has the sight." Dexterous advanced.

"She has been promised to the Sybylline Sisterhood," Metalla agreed, a hint of pride in her voice. "They say she has remarkable visions."

"The prophecies of women are limited and dull," Dexterous snapped. "Only the menfolk have the capacity for true perception."

Rose opened her mouth to rebuke him, but Donna beat her to it. "I'll tell you where the wind's blowing now, mate," she muttered. The ground trembled.

Dexterous glared at her. "The gods mark your words. I'd be careful, were I you."

The Doctor's attention remained on Evelina. "Consuming the vapors, you said?"

"The give me strength," she replied, even as she struggled to remain upright.

"It doesn't look like it." His voice was gentle.

She considered him for a long moment. "Is that your opinion, as a doctor?"
The Doctor's eyes widened. "I beg your pardon?" he asked quietly. Rose could feel the tension in his body, as if he were a bowstring pulled taut.

"Doctor," Evelina said again. "That's your name."

"How did you know that?" He was wary as he stared at her.

She did not reply. Instead, she turned to Rose. "Your name is written on the universe, and you," she looked to Donna, "you call yourself 'Noble.'"

Metella rubbed her arm. "Now then Evelina, don't be rude." Her eyes darted nervously from Lucius to the Doctor to her husband.

"No, no, no, no, let her talk," the Doctor ordered. He rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet, his brow furrowed as if he were examining a particularly difficult repair on the TARDIS.

"You come from so far away," the girl murmured, and then lifted one limp hand to point at Rose. "And you, you've come the furthest of all. You tread from world to world, across the chasm." Rose stared at her, eyes wide, breath coming fast. How could she know that? Donna didn't even know. The Doctor's grip on her hand tightened and he shifted almost imperceptibly forward. He seemed to stand taller, angular and forbidding as the hypocaust flared, casting a reddish tint over the room.

Dexterus's voice cut through the tension. "The female soothsayer is inclined to invent all sorts of vagaries."

The Doctor shook his head. "Not this time, Lucius. I rather think you've been out-soothsayed." His tone was light, but his grasp on Rose's hand did not relax.

Dexterus studied him for a moment, pride and arrogance dripping from every pore. "Is that so, man from—Gallifrey?"

Rose gasped, Donna paled, and the Doctor turned to face the other man. "What?" Shock colored his voice.

"The strangest of images," the man continued. "Your home is lost in fire, is it not?"

"Doctor, what are they doing?" Donna asked, her voice shaking. Dexterus glanced at her.

"You are a daughter of London. And you," he looked at Rose, "your home is London as well."

"Doctor," Rose shifted closer to him, "how does he know that?" The Time Lord stepped in front of her slightly, glaring at Dexterus with burning intensity.

"This is the gift of Pompeii," the augur declared. "Every single oracle tells the truth!"
"That's impossible," Donna snapped, but her voice was far from certain.

Dexterus ignored her. "Doctor, she is coming."

The Doctor frowned. "She? Who is 'she'?"

"Daughter of London," he looked at Donna, "there is something on your back."

"What does that mean?" the woman cried.

"And you, the one they call the Valiant Child—the wolf is at the door." Rose paled.

Evelina shook off her mother's restraining arms and advanced towards them. "Even the word 'doctor' is false," she said, drawing closer. "Your real name is hidden, but it burns in the stars, in the cascade of Medusa herself." The Doctor stared at her. Perhaps it was a trick of the light, but his eyes seemed bottomless, and the angles of his face changed somehow, became alien and ancient. "You are a Lord, sir, a Lord of Time." She turned her head to face Rose. "And you are a wolf in a girl's clothing." Then her eyes rolled into the back of her head and she collapsed.

Rose held the bowl of water as Metella dabbed a damp cloth across Evelina's brow. "She didn't mean to be rude," the woman said quietly. "She's ever such a good girl, but when the gods speak through her," she trailed off.

"It's alright," Rose assured her. "We were just a bit startled." Donna joined them. She perched on one of the stools near Rose and watched Metella tend to Evelina. The woman unwrapped a strip of cloth from the girl's arm, and dipped the rag into the second bowl that Rose held. She lifted the rag out, shiny with olive oil, and gently wiped it across a grayish patch on Evelina's pale skin.

"What's wrong with her arm?" Donna asked.

"An irritation of the skin," Metella replied. "She never complains." She was quiet for a moment, and then turned to the other women, her eyes pleading. "She said that you come from far away. Can you tell me, have you seen anything like it?"

Rose placed a hand on the young woman's arm and gasped. She turned to Donna. "It's stone," she whispered.

The Doctor pulled the grate off of the hypocaust. Thick gray smoke floated toward the ceiling. Caecilius stood behind him, pacing nervously. "This is a different sort of hypocaust," the Doctor commented.

The other man nodded. "Oh yes, we're quite advanced here in Pompeii. In Rome they're still using the old wood burning models, but we have hot springs that run from Vesuvius."

"And who thought up these innovations," the Doctor inquired. "The soothsayers?"

Caecilius glanced at him, surprised. "About seventeen years ago, after the great earthquake." He was quiet for a moment. "There was so much damage—but we rebuilt."

"Is that when the soothsayers started making sense?"

Caecilius nodded. "Before they were, shall we say, unreliable? But after the earthquake everything changed. They could predict crops and rain with total accuracy!"
"And all of the soothsayers, they breathe these vapors?" The other man nodded again. The Doctor reached into the hypocaust and pulled a pinch of something out. "This is what they're breathing," he explained as he ground his fingers together and a fine powder cascaded from them. "They're breathing in Vesuvius."

The Doctor's plan to 'investigate' Lucius Dexterus's plans in his home was going well—until he was caught, of course. The man himself appeared in the doorway as the Doctor unveiled his masterpiece—the future, according to the augur. The Doctor knew better. Six marble slabs like the one Dexterus obtained from Caecilius sat in two rows of three. They were haphazardly placed, and when he straightened them out he let loose an exclamation of triumph.

"What is it?" the augur demanded. Impatient that one, the Doctor thought, conveniently forgetting that he shared the same trait.

"It's an energy converter," he replied.

"What does it convert?"

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. "What, the soothsayer doesn't know?" he mocked.

Dexterus was not amused. "The seed on the breeze may float in any direction."

"I thought you were going to say that," the Doctor sniffed. Then he grinned again. "But I don't know. Isn't that brilliant? I love not knowing; it keeps me on my toes." In the corner, Quintus was looking at him like he was mad. Oh well, maybe he was. He couldn't deny that he had his moments—the Racnoss came to mind, and that time with the hospital. Letting that plasmavore suck him dry hadn't been the best idea he'd had, but he was getting sidetracked. He moved across the room to stand next to Dexterus. "Who designed this, Lucius? Who gave you the instructions?"

"The gods!" the other man snapped.

"I'm on your side," the Doctor's voice was low. "I really am, I can help. Just tell me."

"You insult the gods!" the augur declared. "There can be only one sentence—at arms!"

A bit of constructive babbling, a well-thrown torch, and a good run later, the Doctor and Quintus paused. "Well done," the Doctor said as the boy gasped for breath. "Good bit of allons-y, think we lost them."

"But he was stone," Quintus said breathlessly.

"Yes," the Doctor replied, lost in thought. Something was turning the people of Pompeii into stone before the eruption—something alien. The energy converter confirmed his suspicions. The telepathy could have been natural. Every species possessed the potential for telepathy, although very few actually achieved it. Certain humans had a spark of it, like young Timothy Latimer. Telling the future, seeing through time itself was another matter entirely and one that he would like to discuss with whichever species of alien was trying to invade the Earth this time.

A heavy, clanking noise broke through his thoughts. Quintus was staring at the alley. The sounds were even, plodding, as if someone was taking a step, dropping something heavy and metal, and then repeating the process. "The mountain?" the boy asked, his voice wavering.

"I don't think so," the Doctor replied. The ground shook with the force of each heavy thud. The
noises drew nearer, knocking crates from the walls. "It sounds like—footsteps. Footsteps underground!" The Doctor turned. "Run!" They bolted.

A heavy, rhythmic thumping shook the villa of Lobus Caecillius. Evelina struggled to rise, but Donna pushed her back onto the bed. "Sit," she ordered. "You need to rest."

Rose stood and moved into the main room. Caecillius and Metella joined her, followed by a pair of servants. "What is it?" the older man asked.

"Vesuvius?" his wife supplied.

He shook his head. "It doesn't sound like the mountain."

"It's too regular, like a very slow clock," Rose said slowly. Her eyes widened. "Or footsteps."

The Doctor burst into the room, Quintus at his heels. "Caecillius, get out! Get everyone out!"

Rose ran to him. "Doctor! What is it?"

He grabbed her shoulders. "I think we're being followed. Now get everyone out of here!"

"Donna!" she yelled. "Evelina! We need to go!"

The grate covering the hypocaust flew into the air. A screeching roar filled the room as thick gray smoke poured from the now-uncovered opening. "Get out!" the Doctor called. A sudden blow cracked the stone beneath the hypocaust and sent shuddering shockwaves through the villa. Rose knew that she had to move, that if she did not these people would be in terrible danger—anything that could do that to stone did not bode well for them, but she was rooted to the spot. Another blow rocked the hypocaust, and another. And then it shattered. A form rose out of the rubble—a statue brought to life, rough rock as its skin and a burning red heat glowing in holes that looked like eyes and a mouth.

"The gods are among us," Evelina whispered, awestruck.

"They're not gods!" Rose replied sharply. "Evelina, Caecillius, move!"

"Water!" the Doctor cried. "We need water! Quintus—all of you, get water!" Rose and Donna followed Quintus to get buckets. Caecillius and Metella stood staring at the nightmarish figure that stalked towards them. One of the servants stepped forward.

"Blessed are we to see the Gods!" he said.

The creature regarded him for a moment, and then opened its mouth. Fire poured forth from it, consuming the man in the space of an instant. Evelina screamed. The Doctor moved in front of them, defying the thing. "Talk to me! That's all I want!" he yelled. The thing kept coming. "Talk to me! Just tell me who you are!" It ignored him. "Don't hurt these people, I only want to talk!"

Donna returned with a bucket, but women in red robes seized her and pulled her away. Evelina watched them go, her voice frozen in her throat. The Sibylline sisters. She had told them of Donna's prediction that Pompeii was doomed. She had called it false prophecy. False prophets were killed. Of course, if the stone creature continued on its path, they would all be dead anyway.

"I'm the Doctor!" He was still trying to reason with the thing. "Just tell me who you are!"

Rose and Quintus returned with pails. They scooped water from the decorative pond in the center of
the room and hurled it on the creature. Rose dropped her bucket and pulled the Doctor back. The creature shuddered and roared as the red glow faded and died. With a groaning creak, it crashed to the ground and shattered.

"What was it?" Caecillius demanded.

The Doctor made to move closer to the thing, but Rose refused to release him. "Carapace of stone," he replied, "held together by internal magma, and I'm betting that was just the foot soldier."

"Magma?" Rose asked. "Like, a walking, talking volcano?" He nodded.

"Doctor, or whatever your name is." Metella moved forward, her voice accusing. "You bring bad luck on this house."

He turned to face her, eyebrow raised. "I thought your son was brilliant, aren't you going to thank him?" She embraced Quintus. The Doctor turned back to Rose. "Humans," he muttered. She elbowed him. "Present company excluded," he amended.

They stared at the creature for a while. "So," she said finally. "Aliens?"

He nodded. "I guess it's a good idea we stuck around, but don't tell Donna that." He frowned. "Speaking of Donna, where is she?"

Rose blinked. "Isn't she in here? She was in front of Quintus and me, she should have gotten here first."

"I haven't seen her." Worry creased his forehead. "Donna?" he called. There was no response. "Donna!"

"They have her." Rose and the Doctor whirled around. Evelina took a deep breath and repeated: "They have her. The Sibylline sisters. They came for her when the creature was here."

The Doctor blinked. "Now why would they do that?"

Evelina bit her lip. "It's my fault. She said something—something that sounded like false prophecy, and false prophets,"

"Are killed," the Doctor finished. "Well then, I'll just pop off and fetch her."

"Oi!" Rose interrupted. "I'm coming with."

He shook his head. "I need you to stay here. I don't know if another one of those things will come looking for its friend, and I really don't want them sneaking up on me if they do."

"Quintus can handle it," she argued. "A pitcher of water and it's out!"

"Rose," he said, in the tone he used when discussion was not welcome.

She ground her teeth together. "This is just like the Titanic," she said finally, "and you would have died if Astrid hadn't shown up!"

He put his hands firmly on her shoulders. "No one is dying tonight, not me, not you, and not Donna." She noted that he left out everyone else in Pompeii and made no promises about the morning. "This is not goodbye, this is see-you-later." He leaned down and pressed a brief kiss to her lips before he dashed out into the night. Rose sighed and straightened.
"Well then," she said as she surveyed the room. "Let's put this to rights."

Donna was not happy. In fact, if someone was to ask her on a scale of one to ten, she'd be at around twenty on the not-happy scale. She was tied to an altar, about to be killed by women with dubious taste in clothes and little-to-no skill with makeup, and they were telling her to shut up. No one told Donna Noble to shut up, not and lived to tell about it.

"Listen sister," she snapped, "you may have eyes on the back of your hands, but you'll have eyes on the back of your head when I'm done with you! Now, let me go!"

"This prattling voice will be silenced forever!" the woman declared, and raised the twisted dagger above her head.

"That'll be the day," a man said snidely. If Donna hadn't been so happy to see the Doctor she would have given him an earful for that remark.

The Doctor wandered forward, hands in his pockets, perfectly nonchalant. "Well, that's all right. Just us girls." Donna rolled her eyes. "I knew the Sibyl, you know. Hell of a woman! Blimey, she could dance the tarantella." He moved closer to Donna, still babbling. The women watched him, but did not interfere. "Nice teeth. Truth be told, I think she had a bit of a thing for me. 'It'll never last,' I said, and she said 'I know.'" He paused by the head of the altar. "Of course, she would. You all right then?" he directed the last remark at Donna.

"I've been better," she replied.

"I like the toga," he commented.

"And the ropes?"

He made a face. "Not so much." A buzz of the sonic screwdriver had the ropes falling to the ground. The sisters drew back.

"What magic is this?" the head one asked.

The Doctor ignored her question. He flipped the sonic screwdriver in the air once, and then turned to face them, his expression icy. "The Sibyl would be ashamed of you, you know." His tone was conversational, almost friendly. "All of her wisdom and insight gone sour." His voice darkened. "Is this how you spread the word, on the blade of a knife?"

"A knife that now welcomes you!" the head sister spat and raised the dagger.

"Stop!" a hollow voice echoed through the temple. "Show me this man!" The sisters, as one, dropped to their knees.

"But High Preistess," the self-appointed spokewoman replied, "he would defile us!"

"This one is different," the voice insisted. "He brings starlight in his wake."

The Doctor sniffed. "Oh, very perceptive." He drew nearer to the curtain that concealed the speaker from him. "Where do these words of wisdom come from?"

"The gods," the voice replied. "They whisper to me."
"More than whisper, I'll bet," he muttered, and turned back to the other women. "I beg an audience with the High Priestess. I wish to look upon her." Two of the women rose, and drew back the curtain.

Donna gasped. What looked like a living statue in the shape of a woman lay on a wide bed. "Oh my god," she put her hand to her mouth. "What happened to you?"

"The gods blessed me," the High Priestess replied.

The Doctor drew nearer. "May I?" He gestured to her arm. She nodded in ascent. He touched her lightly, and pulled away. "Stone." He glanced up at her face. "Does it hurt?"

"It is necessary," she replied.

"Who told you that?" Donna asked, horrified.

"The voices."

She stared around the room. "Is that what's going to happen to all of you? To Evelina?" The women nodded in silent agreement. Donna closed her eyes. She felt like she was going to be sick. They were turning to stone, and they acted like it was a good thing! But she knew better, she knew that whatever was speaking to them, was changing them, it wasn't gods.

"Why?" the Doctor asked. "Who are you?"

The stone woman sat straighter. "The High Priestess of the Sibylline!"

His face darkened into an expression that Donna knew well. It was a shadow of how he had looked watching the Racnoss die. The force of it took her breath away. It was easy to forget, sometimes, that he wasn't a man. Even in the short time she had travelled with him, he was so mad that when he reminded her that he really was a 900 year old alien it hit her with unexpected force. "No, I'm talking to the thing inside you, the thing that's seeding itself into human beings through the dust in the lungs!" He stepped forward, vaguely threatening. "You're taking over the flesh and turning it into what?"

The High Priestess started. "Your knowledge is impossible!"

"You can read my mind," he reminded her. "You know it's not. I demand you tell me who you are!"

"We—are—awakening!" The woman's voice changed. A second tone, deeper, akin to the grinding of rock against rock overpowered the sound associated with human vocal cords.

"Name yourself!" he demanded. The darkness deepened in his eyes. Donna could feel his fury rising. "Planet of origin, galactic coordinates! Species designation according to the universal ratification of the Shadow Proclamation!"

"We—are—rising!" the thing that was the High Priestess declared as it pushed away from the bed and stood opposite the Doctor.

"Tell me your name!" Donna fought the urge to run. He was darkness now, and anger, and command. He wore authority like a garment, like he wore humanity—one he could shed at will.

The creature threw its head back. "Pyrovile!" it cried, as if the words had been pulled from its throat.
Volcano Day

Chapter Notes

Quotes taken from 'The Fires of Pompeii.'

Rose hugged her arms about her as she watched the sun slowly climb over the roofs of the city of Pompeii. Morning had arrived. It was volcano day. The Doctor was still gone, and so was Donna. She bit her lip, but refused to let the cold fear that had crept into her stomach work its way through the rest of her body. The song of the TARDIS flared within her mind, comforting and familiar. She smiled at the ship. She was always trying to help.

Caecillius pulled back the curtain, and then returned to sit next to Metella. "Sunrise, my love," he said quietly. "Even the darkest night must end." The family huddled against the walls. Only Evelina seemed unafraid. She stared at the broken remnants of the creature, but her eyes were far away. Quintus sat next to her, a bucket of water within arm's reach.

"The mountain is worse than ever," the boy said, his eyes fixed on the streams of thick black smoke that rose from Vesuvius to the heavens.

"We killed a messenger of the gods in our own house," Metella gasped, her voice choked.

Rose shook her head. "Whatever that thing was, it wasn't a god." Her voice even and sure.

"What was it then?" The woman sounded desperate.

"The Doctor will know," Rose replied, her eyes on Vesuvius.

"Who is he?" Metella clutched at Caecillius's arm. "Who are any of you?"

Rose smiled sadly. "That's a very long story, and you probably wouldn't believe me if I told you. But he's good, the Doctor." She paused, regret burning in her throat. She liked these people—and they were going to die today. "And I'm sorry, so sorry."

"For what?" Caecillius asked. Rose did not answer.

Metella turned to Evelina. "Sweetheart, can you see? Tell us—what will happen?"

"Leave her alone!" Quintus snapped.

Evelina shook her head as if to clear it, and then leaned back and closed her eyes. She was silent for a moment. "I can see." Her brow furrowed. "A choice. Someone will have to make a choice." She paled, and gasped. "The most terrible choice." Her voice broke as she spoke. She wavered, and Metella moved to go to her, but Rose was closer. She caught the girl, who clung to her, sobbing. Rose held her until her shoulders stopped shaking, and then Evelina pushed away. She met Rose's eyes, and her own were glassy again and so far away. "They are returning," she murmured. "Falling through time itself. They ride the shockwaves of the first war, the last war, the war that never ends."

Ice pumped through her veins. "I stopped it," Rose replied equally softly. "It's done. They're dead."
Evelina shook her head. "They survive. They always survive." The girl reached up and brushed a lock of hair back behind Rose's ear. "You burned for him once," she said. "Would you do so again?"

"In a heartbeat."

The girl nodded and the strange look faded from her face. She sighed, and slid down the wall to sit on the floor. Rose remained standing, her mind racing.

They were going into the volcano. Into the volcano. Of course, he had managed to hold off the soon-to-be pyrovile with a water pistol, so Donna had to admit that maybe, just maybe the Doctor knew what he was talking about, but their current location seemed a bit much. Still, it had been the only way out, what with the Sisters blocking the door to the street, and Donna didn't fancy getting better acquainted with that dagger.

"But if it's aliens making the volcano erupt," she asked, voicing a possibility that had been troubling her for some time. "Doesn't that make it okay for you to stop it?"

"It's still fixed," the Doctor replied from further in. "Still part of history."

"But I'm part of history!" she protested. "And so is Rose!"

"Neither of you is a fixed point in time," he reminded her.

"How can you tell?" She worried at the question like a dog with a bone. Persistent, she was, let no one say otherwise. "You aren't just guessing, right?"

He turned to face her, his jaw set and his eyes forbidding. "That's who I am, Donna Noble. You humans with your funny little brains, you can only see time as linear, but me, I can see it all as it truly is. Every waking second I can see what is, what was, what could be, and what must not." Some of the fire seemed to go out of him, and for a moment he looked very old, and very tired. "It's the burden of the Time Lords, Donna, and it's mine to bear. Alone." He turned and walked away from her, further into the volcano.

She was still for a moment, and then she followed. "How many died?" she finally asked.

He flinched. "Stop it."

She refused. "How many?"

He faced her again, eyes blazing. "Twenty thousand."

She couldn't properly visualize it, the number was too large. She could wrap her mind around one, or ten, or a hundred even, but twenty thousand? "Is that what you can see?" she asked a bit more quietly. "All twenty thousand?" He glared at her. "And you think that's all right, do you?"

"I think that twenty thousand people for the world is a fair trade!" he snapped back. "A city for a planet, a planet for a universe!" He stepped closer to her, fury radiating off him like heat from the rocks around them. "Did you ever wonder why I was the last, Donna?" He was inches away from her now, so close that she felt his eyes drawing her in like twin black holes. The red light around them flickered and threw strange shadows across his face. "I killed them. I killed them all. It was Gallifrey or the universe, Donna, and I picked the universe." He paused for a moment. "Don't think," he began, "don't ever think that I wouldn't sacrifice you in a second."

She refused to be intimidated by him, or at least to let him know that she was. He terrified her, she'd
said before, and it was still true. When he was like this—he was terrifying. "What about Rose?" she asked, quite proud that her voice was even.

Blankness slipped across his features like a mask. "I already have," he replied flatly. "Twice." Then he turned away from her and continued on.

A screeching roar echoed through the tunnel, vibrating the stone that Donna and the Doctor were crouched behind. "They know we're here," he murmured. Donna nodded. The interior of Vesuvius stretched out in front of them. Something too round and smooth to be naturally occurring rock caught Donna's eye, and she pointed it out to the Doctor. He pulled a tiny telescope out of his pockets—dimensionally transcendent, Donna remembered him saying—and stared through it at the object.


"You'd better think of something quick!" Donna hissed. "Rocky IV is on its way!"

The Doctor waved her concern away. "Yes, yes I know."

She was quiet for a moment. "But why do they need a volcano? Are they gonna use the eruption to launch themselves back into space?"

"No, it's worse than that."

She stared at him. "How can it be worse?"

Great. Just great. They were trapped in what might possibly be an escape pod in the middle of a volcano that was supposed to be erupting at any time. Add to those little inconveniences that an alien race was going to use Pompeii as a jumping-off point for their new empire and Donna could see why the Doctor was rude. She would be too if her days were usually like this, although come to think of it, if she was on the TARDIS they probably would be.

"Lost," she muttered. "What did they mean, 'lost'? How do you lose a planet?"

"Can I have a bit of hush?" the Doctor snapped, his eyes on the control panel. "I'm trying to work out how to get us out of here, thanks."

Donna was silent for a moment, but then she noticed something. "Getting a bit warmer in here," she commented as sweat dripped down her neck.

His eyes widened. "Oh. Oh."

"What? What is it?" she demanded.

He pointed to the marble panels set into the top of the console. "See? The energy converter takes the lava and uses the power to create a fusion matrix which welds pyrovile to human. Now that it's complete they can convert millions."

Donna stared at him, and then glanced frantically around the console. "Well, can't you change it with these controls?"

He ran a hand through his hair. "Of course I can, but don't you see?" She stared at him blankly. "That's why the soothsayers can't see the volcano. Right now, there is no volcano. Vesuvius will
never erupt. The pyroviles are taking all of its power. They're going to use it to take over the world."

"But you can change it back?" the lilt in her voice made her words a desperate question.

He ruffled his hair again frantically. "I can invert the system, set off the volcano, and blow them up, but that—" He took a step back from the console, white showing around his irises. "That's the choice. It's Pompeii or the world."

"Oh my god," she whispered. Her stomach roiled as his words sank in. Her eyes burned with unshed tears and she knew that his were bright with them as well. Hers dripped down her face, but his remained corralled behind his lids. His whole body was taut with tension—he fairly vibrated with it.

"If Pompeii is destroyed," he said finally, "then it's not just history. It's me. I did this. I made it happen." He closed his eyes for a moment, and then he burst into action. He ran the sonic over the marble plates as Donna watched.

"But they're rock!" she protested. "What if they can't be blown up?"

He shook his head. "Vesuvius explodes with the force of twenty-four nuclear bombs. Nothing can survive that." He paused. "Certainly not us."

"Don't think about us right now," she said quietly.

He set his hands on the lever, the lever that if pushed would flip the system and destroy a city. He stood for a moment, head bowed, eyes closed, silent. Donna waited. When he did speak his voice was so quiet that Donna couldn't be sure he'd actually said anything.

"What?" she asked, bending closer to him.

"She told me to," he repeated, eyes still closed, hands on the lever. "Rose. D'you remember when Ten Downing Street was blown up?"

Donna blinked. "Yeah, said it was terrorists."

A small smile played across his lips. "Humans. It wasn't terrorists—well, unless you classify aliens who want to turn the world into a ball of nuclear waste so they can sell it for fuel as terrorists." He took a breath. "No. It was me. Me and Rose. Blowing up Ten Downing street was the only way to stop them, but we were inside, and I couldn't be sure that we'd live. Oh, I probably would. I've got more lives than a cat—but Rose." He stopped. Donna waited patiently for him to continue. "I said 'I could save the world but lose you,' and she said 'do it.' She didn't even know what it was." His breathing was ragged and something that sounded like a sob bubbled from his throat. "Twenty thousand people."

Donna covered his hands with her own, and she knew. She knew that he wouldn't be able to do it without her. She knew that he needed someone to tell him that it was the right choice and sometimes he needed someone to choose for him. He looked at her, and she nodded. They pushed down together.

Evelina's head snapped backwards as she screamed. Metella was there in an instant, her arms around her daughter. Rose pushed herself away from the wall where she'd been leaning as a long, low roar shook the air around them.

"The future is changing!" Evelina cried. "Death, only death!"
Caecillius pulled the curtain from the window. He stood there for a long moment before he turned to face the others, his face frozen in horror. "The sky is falling!" he cried as smoke and ash rose to the heavens and blotted out the sun.

Rose grabbed Quintus and Evelina's hands. "Here!" she cried. "Close to the TARDIS!" She hoped that the force field was still operational. Metella and Caecillius followed and they huddled against the wood paneling. The TARDIS sang in her head, ancient and sorrowful, and Rose knew that this was the end of Pompeii. The air was choked with smoke and ash and dust. The villa shuddered and bucked and chunks of stone rained down around them. She remembered the pictures she'd seen—museum exhibits that were so far removed from the people around her. Evelina sobbed, Metella clung to her husband. Quintus stared wide-eyed as everything he knew collapsed around him.

The Doctor burst through the disintegrating room, followed closely by Donna. Rose wanted to launch herself into his arms, but he hardly glanced at her. Instead he made straight for the TARDIS. "Move!" he cried. "Get back!"

Rose stood, but remained where she was. Donna caught up then, panting heavily as if they'd run a great distance. "Doctor!" Rose pleaded, "take them with you!"

"I can't." His voice was flat and empty. "I can't save anyone, Rose. History says they all died."

"It doesn't!" she snapped back. "Cause I've read about it!"

He looked at her then, and she almost didn't recognize him, or rather, she remembered all too well. The last time he looked at her like that, he'd been aiming a gun at her.

"Gods save us, Doctor!" Caecillius cried, and the Time Lord's focus shifted. For a long minute he stared at the family huddled against the wall next to the TARDIS. They clutched at each other, tears running down their faces to mingle with dust and ash. He turned away, his key in the TARDIS lock.

"Save someone, Doctor!" Donna cried. "Anyone, just someone."

"I can't," he bit the words out. He was talking to Donna but looking at Rose.

"It's not fair!" the ginger woman cried. "You can't just leave them!"

"Don't you think I've done enough?" he yelled, gesturing to the chaos around them. "History is back in place and everyone dies! Just like Gallifrey, Rose! I did this."

She stood in the face of his fury, his rage and sorrow. She stood with ash in her hair and tears on her cheeks, and when she spoke her voice was gentle. "Just someone, Doctor. Please, save someone."

He railed against her for a time, furious that she asked him this in the face of what he had done. And then his shoulders bowed. He opened the TARDIS door, turned to Caecillius, and held out his hand.

"Come with me," he said. The other man stared at him in wonder, and took his hand.

Donna watched them as they watched Pompeii burn. The TARDIS was behind them, on the crest of the hill. Caecillius, Metella, Evelina, and Quints stood in front of them, their eyes locked on the city below. Their eyes were wide, and tears still dripped down their cheeks. Everyone they knew was dead. Everything they had was lost. Well, not everything. They had their lives, and they had each other.

Her eyes strayed. The Doctor and Rose were standing slightly back from the others. Their hands
were intertwined and their faces dry as they looked out on the destruction of Pompeii. She knew that they didn't really see it, that their memories had taken both of them to different places. In the light of Vesuvius they looked strange—surreal. Shadows filled the hollows of the Doctor's cheeks and stole into his eyes. He was angular and alien, imposing and stiller than stone. Red-orange light flickered across Rose's face, highlighting her golden hair and the flare of her amber eyes. She looked like a wild thing. Then the Doctor turned, and the moment was lost. He was a man again, even if pain etched lines into his face that spoke of centuries' worth of loss.

"It's never forgotten, Caecilius," he said finally. "Time will pass, men will move on, and stories will fade, but one day, one day it will be discovered again. In thousands of years people will remember all of you."

The man did not look at him. He stared at the mountain and the remains of his home. Metella, however, fixed her gaze on the Doctor and Rose. "Who are you? You with your temple that contains such size within? Where do you come from?"

"Like Evelina said," Rose replied. "Far away."

The Doctor nodded. "We're no one. We were never here. Don't tell anyone."

Caecilius stepped forward. "The god Vulcan must be furious," he mused. "It's so volcanic, like some kind of—volcano."

The Doctor pulled Rose back toward the TARDIS, and motioned for Donna to follow along. They slipped inside, leaving the family to mourn the loss of their home.

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Rose pulled the Doctor into a tight embrace. He went willingly, burying his face in her hair, his hands fistling in the soft cloth of her dress. They clung to each other with a ferocity that was difficult to watch, and Donna found herself looking away. She went to slip away to her own room for a shower, when the Doctor's voice stopped her.

"Donna." She turned back to face him. His arms were still around Rose, but he looked at her with a small smile on his face. "Thank you. You were right. Sometimes I need someone to stop me."

She smiled back. "You're welcome, you great big outer-space dunce." She yawned. "Now, I'm off for a shower and then bed. I don't know about you two, but getting blown up is exhausting." Their laughter followed her down the hall.
In Darkness

Chapter Notes

FYI: Sexytimes in this chapter.

He came to her that night, long after he left her at her bedroom door with another desperate hug and a good night kiss. She was waiting for him. She'd been expecting this. Something pulled her out of a deep, dreamless sleep, and she was half-awake before she realized what it was. He was standing in the doorway, on the threshold of her room. It wasn't the light that poured through from the hallway that woke her, nor was it the creak of the door opening—the TARDIS was silent. It was the sense of his presence at her back, heavy and warm like an extra blanket and radiating hurt.

He had come to her before, after the Dalek, after her father. She woke then too but remained still. She knew that if she let him know she was awake the spell would be broken, and he would pretend that he opened the wrong door by mistake instead of seeking her out. He came to her after the Wire, and then he actually entered the room and crouched beside her bed to make sure her face was still there before he left. After the beast he came more frequently and stayed longer, always on the threshold, never quite entering. She knew, then, that he believed it, that he believed she would die in battle.

But now, now they were changing, and she knew that silent reassurance was not what he needed. She rolled over to face the door. "Are you gonna stand there all night, Doctor, or are you gonna come in?" she asked, sleep still heavy in her voice.

He started guiltily. For a moment he stood there, as if he was caught between entering and fleeing, and then he stepped inside and closed the door. The lights slowly brightened, allowing her eyes to adjust without the pain that accompanied the sudden flip of the switch. He moved across the room and sat on the bed. She shifted so that her back was against the headboard. He toed his trainers off and swung his legs up beside her own.

"How did you know it was me?" he asked finally.

She took his hand. "I just did. I always know you, no matter what face you wear." She stroked the back of his hand with her thumb. "And I always will."

"I seem to remember one occasion when you most definitely did not believe I was me," he reminded her.

"S your fault for not telling me about regeneration sooner," she replied.

He scratched his ear with his free hand. "Suppose it is, yeah. Better tell Donna about it tomorrow, not that I'm expecting to, you understand." He gave her a cheeky grin. "I rather like this body. I haven't been sexy before, you know. Attractive, maybe, but not sexy."

She laid her head against his shoulder. "I dunno, I liked your last body."

He made a sound of protest in his throat. "The ears on me!"
She grinned. "Good handholds. And besides," she tilted her face up so that her lips were next to his ear. "I like a man in leather."

"Rose Tyler, you minx," he replied with a smile. They were silent for a moment, the air around them heavy with words and actions that were waiting just beneath the surface. She took used the time to look at him, really look. His hair was mussed, and his jacket was missing. So was his tie. His glasses were tucked in the breast pocket of his shirt—blue, if she remembered right. It was the blue shirt. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, and she fancied that she could see spots of grease on his hands. His collar was unbuttoned and a glimpse of his undershirt peaked through. He looked different without all of his layers—open, vulnerable.

They are returning.

She shivered as Evelina's words rose up through her mind as if from a deep pit.

They survive. They always survive.

She killed him to stop them, and now it was apparently for nothing. Well, not exactly for nothing; the earth was safe, after all.

His and tightened around her own. "Rose?"

"Sorry," she murmured. "Remembering."

He let go of her hand and wrapped his arm around her, pulling her closer to him. She laid her head on his chest and he bent to kiss her hair, breathing in the scent of her. She was here, and warm, and very much alive.

The wolf is at the door.


A storm is coming.

He held her tighter. She did not protest. Her arms slid from her sides over the rumpled cloth of his shirt to wrap around him.

"You can't keep me safe." Her voice was quiet, but firm. How had she known that's what he was thinking? "You can't keep leaving me behind."

"Rose," he began. She cut him off.

"I didn't cross worlds to let you wrap me in cotton wool, Doctor." She pulled back from him a tad, just enough so she could look him in the eye. A muscle in his jaw twitched. "I'm not child anymore," she reminded him. "I'm two hundred and four years old, and I've got this." She reached one arm behind her to the bedside table, and pulled the Dimension Cannon out of its place in the drawer. She held it in front of him. "I keep it on me always. If you leave me behind I'll follow you."

"So you can get yourself killed?" he demanded.

She looked at him evenly. "I could die tomorrow." He flinched. "I could get hit by a stray bullet, or a car, or choke on some chips, or fall wrong, or not run fast enough, or offend the wrong person, or"

"Stop it!" he snapped. "Just stop it, Rose!" He turned his face away, although his arm remained around her.
She wouldn't let it drop. He needed to hear this, to understand. All of this time and he still thought of her like a child, like someone he could put in the corner for her own safety. "Donna was right," she said finally. "You're a great, big, outerspace dunce." That got him to look at her. She moved closer to him, pushing up against his side until she was almost in his lap. He tensed.

"I'm afraid, Rose," he said finally, his voice soft. "I've never needed someone before, not specifically. I've needed to not be alone, to have a companion, but that's it." He took a deep breath and let it out. The tension seemed to drain out of him. "I need you. I need you like I need precious little else." He turned his body so that he was facing her, cupping her cheek with his free hand. "And that terrifies me."

She looked up at him and realized that he'd stripped away the clothes he wore as armor just as he'd stripped away the walls behind his eyes. The jacket, the overcoat, they served to keep the world at bay, to lessen the sensation of touch. He was standing—well, sitting—before her as naked as she'd ever seen him. She knew better than most just how much that vulnerability cost him.

Her lips were pressed against his before her brain registered what she was doing. It murmured at her, fleeting thoughts of 'too soon,' and 'not healed,' and 'ill-considered,' but she didn't listen. The TARDIS sang in her head and the Doctor's lips were cool against her own and he seemed to want it just as badly as she did. The covers slipped away as he pulled her into his lap. They had never kissed like this before. Not in her bed, not wearing so little clothing. She had, after all, been sleeping, and as per custom wore only a nightgown that ended at mid-thigh.

She gasped as he ran his hands over her. He was forging ahead, kissing her with a force and desire that she could not help but reciprocate. He seemed to sense her surprise and stopped.

"If it's too soon," he began, but she silenced him with a kiss.

"I've waited for ages," she whispered.

He made love to her in darkness, with a ferocity born of the need to drive away nightmares and forebodings and memories of loss. They drowned out the remembered voices of the dead with the thunder of their heartsbeats and the gasp of air into their lungs. They submerged themselves into the other, aching to feel the life that was warm and electric beneath their hands, lips, tongues, bodies. For as long as they could last time stood still, held at bay in a way older than recorded history.

He lay on his back and stared at a ceiling he could not see. Rose was curled against him, her head resting on his shoulder. He could feel her pulse, steady and strong. The universe pulsed around them and Time flowed like an ocean—currents and ripples and eddies and sparse, fixed moments like reefs. One day time would reach out its hand and take her from him. One day--but not tonight.
It was early morning in Cardiff, Wales. The city was just waking up but the members of Torchwood 3—the last remnant of the once sprawling and powerful organization—had been at work for hours. Captain Jack Harkness was always there, as he called the secret base beneath the hub home. It was easier to blend in if he kept to himself, and it saved him from having to move every ten years or so. If given long enough even the most oblivious human noticed that the handsome young man next-door failed to age.

Ianto Jones was the second in. He was their man-of-all-work: coffee boy, secretary, cataloger, and more as the need arose. He kept the place clean, buried the bodies, and ran the tourist information station that served as their back door. He was also Captain Jack's lover. Originally it was a way for both men to cope with the things they'd lost—Ianto's girlfriend had been cyberized in the battle of Canary Wharf, and Jack thought that Rose had been killed as well.

Toshiko Santo usually arrived next, followed closely by Gwen Cooper. They were a study in opposites. Gwen was warm, outgoing, and the only one of the five who was in a stable, normal relationship. Tosh was quiet, efficient, and had a long-standing and painfully one-sided 'thing' for the last, and least punctual, member of the team: Doctor Owen Harper.

He frequently arrived after the others had settled in, and often in some stage of hangover recovery. He could be a right bastard, and he frequently was, but he was also intelligent and brave, and a damn good doctor. While Tosh kept tabs on the Rift and monitored anachronistic and extraterrestrial tech, Owen studied alien biology and medicine, in between patching up his colleagues. Torchwood missions tended to be messy.

Like any normal morning Jack woke before dawn, Ianto made coffee, Gwen brought pastries, Tosh arrived exactly on time, and Owen complained about everything. Unlike most mornings, a sharp knock on his office door interrupted Jack's enjoyment of his first morning coffee.

"Come in," he called.

Tosh opened the door but remained outside his office. "We've got rift activity Jack. It's a big one." He jumped up, his coffee forgotten on his desk. "It started about twenty minutes ago," she said as they entered the main room of the hub. "At first it looked like regular fluctuations, but then, well," she gestured at the screen. "Take a look for yourself."

He did. The lines on the screen twisted and jumped. The corresponding numbers displayed an alarming pattern.

"What is it, Jack? That was Gwen at his elbow.

"Something's coming through," he responded. "Something big—human sized or larger." He pulled back from the screen. "Gwen, get Owen. If it is a person we might need him. Tosh, keep an eye on the screen and let me know when it peaks."

"What are you going to do?" the petite Asian woman asked.
He flashed his patented Jack Harkness grin. "I'm going to go meet the neighbors."

It was a raw, wet morning. Typical Welsh weather, he thought as he stood on the lift. There was an energy in the air that reminded him of the time just before lightning struck. It positively crackled around him. The hair on his arms stood at attention, as did his hackles. This was more than something coming—this was something being pushed through. The air around him thickened and wavered. It was like looking through old glass windows. Images flashed and faded before his eyes like mirages in the desert.

He thought he heard a voice calling to him through the plate-glass air, a voice speaking a language that was achingly familiar. It couldn't be. He hadn't heard that tongue in almost a century. One of the images to his left seemed to solidify. It was a tall man with short, dark, curly hair. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the images stopped. The air cleared and the man remained.

He looked around, clearly lost. Jack stepped off of the lift and away from the shield the chameleon circuit provided.

"Hello!" Jack called.

The man turned to face him, but looked confused. "H-hello?" he replied. "Can you help me? I-I-I think I'm l-lost."

Jack stared at him. The strange man was speaking his native language.

"Jack," Tosh's voice chirped from the device next to his ear. "Jack, are you there?"

He cleared his throat and pressed the 'respond' button. "I'm here."

"The rift has stabilized," she said. "Whatever was coming is here."

"Yeah, I know," he replied. "I'm looking at him."

"Him?"

"Just give me a minute, and tell Owen to get ready. Whoever he is, he needs a full physical." Jack clicked the communicator off and turned back to the man in front of him.

"C-can you und-d-derstand me?" the stranger asked.

Jack flashed another one of his trademarked grins. "Most definitely." He held out a hand. "I'm Captain Jack Harkness of the Torchwood Institute. And you are?"

The man looked at him for a long moment before he took the offered hand. "Lee. Lee McAvoy."

"Nice to meet you, Lee," Jack said as they shook hands. "Any idea how you got here?"

Lee shook his head. "One m-m-minute I'm st-tanding in a teleport, the n-next I'm here."

Jack sighed. Of course it was never easy. "Well, come and meet my team, and we'll see if we can figure out what happened."

"C-can you send me b-back?" Jack winced at the hope in the other man's voice. "To the library, I m-mean? I have to find my w-w-wife."

Jack laid a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry. We can't."
Tosh and Gwen regarded the strange man warily as Jack led him into the hub. Owen went to work with his usual ill-grace and the two women converged on Jack.

"Who is he?" Gwen asked.

"His name is Lee," he responded. "And he's from sometime around the fifty-first century."


"What language was he speaking?" That was Gwen again.

"English, well, the fifty-first century equivalent."

"Didn't sound like English," the Welsh woman observed.

"Languages can change a lot in almost three thousand years," Jack observed dryly.

"So, what are we going to do?" Tosh wanted to know. "Are we going to try and send him home?"

He shook his head. "There's no way. And there's something—odd—about how he came through the rift. Most people just stumble into it by accident, but someone wanted to make sure that he came to this place, in this time."

A shadow peeled itself away from the wall of a building adjoining the Plass. Red, red lips curved into a grin and blue eyes sparkled in amusement. She pushed her sandy curls out of her face. She still had it. Not that she ever really doubted her abilities, but it was nice for some concrete confirmation. She'd always been good with teleports, but then, she'd had a good teacher. She looked around the Plass, satisfaction evident in the set of her features. Everything was coming together nicely.

She turned on the heel of her black boots and pulled her gray leather jacket more tightly about her. God, she hated Cardiff in the fall. Miserable weather. She glanced at the device on her wrist, took five steps, and disappeared.
The TARDIS jerked back and forth. Rose felt like she was on a see-saw, or a ship in particularly heavy seas. The Doctor was grinning as always and seemed to be keeping his feet. Donna was clutching one of the support struts with all her might, and Rose clung to the console, trying to stay out of the Doctor's way. Finally he flipped a switch and the teetering ground to a halt. Rose and Donna continued to sway for a moment, carried through by inertia.

"Set the controls to random," the Doctor said, grinning. "Could be anything out there." He reached for Rose. "Anywhere, anywhen even."

Donna smirked a bit as he grabbed Rose's hand. She'd almost run into him as he was exiting Rose's room, looking distinctly mussed. He'd expected a bit of teasing, or a rant, or something. He got a wide grin and an 'about time!' She seemed to be holding whatever ribbing she was thinking of doing off, and instead shot him little knowing looks.

"Seriously?" Rose asked.

The Doctor nodded. "Yep," he replied, popping the 'p.' "Remember that one time I used your iPod set on shuffle as coordinates?"

She rolled her eyes. "That ended well."

He grinned. "I'm sure this'll be much better."

"Come on you two!" Donna hollered from next to the door. "This is—I don't have a word for it!"

The Doctor donned his brown overcoat and he and Rose followed Donna to the threshold of the TARDIS. "I know what it's like," he said to Donna. "The fear, the wonder, the excitement, I get that!"

"After all this time?" she was surprised.

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah! Why d'you think I keep going?"

Her eyes flickered to Rose meaningfully. He groaned. "Oh, go outside Donna!"

"Only if you two promise to follow me," she replied with a smile. "No shagging in the console room!"

Rose looked at the Doctor. He rubbed his neck. "She may have seen me earlier, when I was going to shower," he said apologetically. "And by may have, I mean most certainly did, and by seen, I mean ran into me."

"Right," she replied. And then she grinned. "Saves me from having to tell her later."
"Oi!" Donna's voice intruded on their conversation. "Are you coming?" She pushed the TARDIS doors open and stepped out.

The cold hit her like a brick wall. Snow coated the ground around them and the mountains that surrounded them. Icicles hung like stalactites from a stone arch that looked like a bridge spanning the chasm in front of them. Donna shuddered as the Doctor and Rose joined her. She noted that while the Doctor seemed unbothered, Rose was also looking a bit chilly.

"I've got the word now," she muttered. "Bloody freezing!" Rose grinned.

The Doctor was not paying attention to his companions. "Look, snow! Real snow, proper snow at last!" He grinned at Rose. "You have no idea how long it's been since I've seen actual snow."

"D'you want to make a snowman?" she asked with a cheeky smile.

"I fancy a bit of exploring. Ladies?" He turned to look at Donna, but she was gone. "Donna?"

The TARDIS doors opened again, and Donna came out wearing a fur-lined parka. She handed another to Rose, who slipped it on with a grateful sigh. "This is more like it." She elbowed the Doctor. "Not all of us are immune to the weather."

"Can you hear anything in there?" he asked Donna.

"Pardon?" she replied with a smile.

"Right, I was saying," he began, but she wasn't listening. Above them a ship cut through the air.

"A rocket!" she cried. "Now that's what I call a spaceship! You've got a box, and he's got a Ferrari." The Doctor looked a bit injured, but Donna forged ahead. "Come on, let's see where he's going!" Rose hid a grin as the Doctor muttered about ungrateful humans and followed Donna.

They were in the middle of relating to Donna how they saved Queen Victoria from a werewolf, and as a result were both given titles and then banished, when the Doctor froze. "Can you hear that?" he asked, spinning on the spot.

"What?" Donna asked.

"Take down your hood," he snapped. She did so, but continued to look confused. Rose frowned. There was something in the air, something that sounded faintly like—.

She looked to the Doctor for confirmation. "Singing?"

He nodded. "A song on the wind." He turned again, like a dog getting the scent, and then led them away from the path they'd been following. Rose could barely hear the wordless tune, but the Doctor had better ears than she did, assuming that the song could be heard. It reminded her faintly of the TARDIS, and she knew that melody was in her head. They picked their way down the mountain carefully. Rose was glad she was wearing practical boots and not one of the more risky pairs of shoes she loved. Once she almost tumbled head-over-heels, but the Doctor caught her about the waist and held her steady until she regained her balance. The further they went, the louder the song became.

They entered a clearing and the music filled Rose's mind. It was sad, so sad that she found herself in tears, but it was beautiful. A figure lay on the ground further into the clearing, a figure that Rose
knew well. It was an Ood. She shivered, remembering the last and only time she'd seen Ood before.

_The lost girl, so far from home. The valiant child who will die in battle so very soon._

The Doctor ran to him, Donna close behind. Rose stared at it, memories playing in a loop in her head.

_He is awake._

_And you will worship him._

_This is the Darkness; this is my domain._

_You will die, and I will live._

The Doctor's voice intruded on her thoughts. "He's a 'he,' Donna, not an 'it.'"

"Right. Sorry," the woman responded. She glanced up. "Rose?"

She blinked. "Yeah?"

Donna noted her tension, the strained look on her face. "Are you okay?" The Doctor continued to talk to the Ood, his stethoscope out. He tried placing it on the creature's body, but finally gave up.

"I don't know where the heart is," he muttered. "Come to think of it, I don't know if he's got a heart."

"Rose?" Donna asked again.

She shook her head as if to clear it. "Yeah, yeah I'm fine. Just didn't expect to see one of them here. Or, well, ever again." She moved forward and knelt beside the Ood, but she was careful to avoid touching him. She studied his face intently, searching for something. Evidently she found what she was looking for, as she relaxed and took the Ood's hand.

"Talk to him," the Doctor instructed, still listening with his stethoscope. "Keep him going."

"What's your name, sweetheart?" Donna asked.

The ball in the Ood's fist lit up. "Designated Ood delta fifty," he said weakly.

She smiled at him. "I'm Donna, and this is Rose, and he's the Doctor. We're gonna patch you up."

"The circle," he began.

Donna shook her head. "Don't try to talk."

"The circle must be broken," he insisted.

"What circle, delta fifty?" The Doctor set his stethoscope down. "Delta fifty, what circle?"

The Ood turned to face him and a roar issued from the translator ball. He opened his eyes. They were red. The Doctor jumped back, pulling Donna and Rose with him. Delta fifty tried to rise, but fell back. Donna broke away from the Doctor and knelt by his side again.

"Careful!" the Time Lord snapped.

Donna arranged the body gently. "He's dead. We were too late." She stroked his head. "Do we bury him, or what?"
The Doctor shook his head. "The snow'll take care of that."

"What's an Ood, anyway?" the ginger woman asked as they left the clearing and returned to their original path.

"They're servants of Humans in the forty-second century," the Doctor replied.

"Slaves is more like it," Rose butted in. "They don't get paid, and they do all the manual jobs, at least they did on the sanctuary base."

The Doctor blinked. "I didn't really notice. We met them once before," he explained. "The thing is, the Ood are benign, totally benign and mildly telepathic—hence the song. It was his mind calling out."

"I didn't hear anything," Donna commented.

"Well, just means you're not telepathically receptive." He grinned. "Too stubborn for that, you are."

"Oi!" She shoved him. "Rude."

"And not ginger!" he responded. She would have to ask him where that reference came from. He was always using it.

"His eyes turned red," Rose said quietly. She looked—far away.

"What's that mean?" Donna asked.

The Doctor's face was set in stiff lines. "Trouble." Then, as was his custom, his mood shifted and he became animated again. "Anyway, the last time we met them there was a stronger mind that took them over, controlled them."

Donna kept her eyes on the ground as they picked their way toward wherever the rocket had gone. "What was it?"

"Long story," the Doctor replied.

"Long walk," Donna observed.

"It was the Beast," Rose said after a while. Even her voice sounded distant. "The Beast in the pit." Donna continued to look confused.

"It was the Devil," the Doctor clarified.

Rose shot him an angry look. "You told me you didn't believe that. You told me it lied."

"I don't believe that it was the literal Devil, fallen angel and all that. But there are representations of a horned beast in thousands, if not millions, of cultures." He shrugged. "That idea had to come from somewhere."

"It said I would die in battle," Rose murmured.

He turned his face towards her. "But you didn't," he reminded her softly. "You lived."

She sighed. "Sometimes I wondered."

Pain flashed across the Doctor's face, sharp and bitter and biting. He pulled Rose closer to him.
Donna was tempted to ask again, but she held her tongue. There was so much that the two of them didn't say, so much that she had to piece together from fragments of conversations and slips of the tongue.

"Can't be that this time," the Doctor said finally. "We beat it. Must be something closer to home." They reached the crest of a ridge.

"Something like that?" Donna asked as she pointed to the sprawling complex below.

The Doctor grinned. "Allons-y!"

A smartly dressed young woman was giving what sounded like a sales pitch. She was surrounded by a crowd of people—rich people. Years of living with her wealthy parallel dad allowed her to assess their clothing at a glance. It was quality stuff, expensive. The cut of the women's dresses and coats was expertly done and designed to flatter. The men wore what she presumed were the latest fashions, also precisely tailored. Rose felt a bit out of place in her jeans and t-shirt, but if the Doctor had taught her anything, it was that confidence carried the day (and wearing comfortable running shoes was mandatory).

"Sorry, sorry," the Doctor said cheerfully and without a bit of repentance in his voice. "Bit late, don't mind us. The guards let us through."

"And you would be?" the young woman asked with admirable poise.

The Doctor flashed the psychic paper at her. "The Doctor and Rose Tyler, and Donna Noble."

"Representing the Noble Corporation," Donna broke in, "PLC, Limited, Intergalactic." She gave the young woman a bright smile, and Rose hid a grin. She was almost as good a liar as the Doctor.

"Must have fallen off my list," the young woman replied. "Apologies, won't happen again. I'm Solana, head of marketing, and here are your information packets." Two Ood began handing slim packages to the crowd. "They contain vouchers, 3-D Tickets, and a map of the complex. Now, if you'll follow me, Doctor Tyler, Mrs. Tyler, Miss Noble, we'll be heading to the executive suits."

"Must have been one hell of a party," Rose muttered to the Doctor as they fell in with the crowd behind Solana.

"How's that?" He looked confused.

"Our reception." She grinned at him. "Think I'd remember getting married to you. I'd certainly remember the slap mum would have given you for marrying me and not letting her be there." Was it her imagination, or was he blushing just a bit?

"Ah. Yes." He was blushing! He cleared his throat. "Put two people in close quarters and it's only natural others assume they're in a relationship. People were always doing it before, remember? Even your dad."

She elbowed him playfully. "Yeah, but you denied it."

"So did you," he pointed out. "I didn't hear any objections."

She arched an eyebrow. "I don't have any objections."

He looked confused. "Then why are we having this discussion?" She laughed, and hugged his arm.
"Rose?" She refused to answer him and instead she continued laughing. He pouted. "I really don't see what's so funny."

Donna snorted behind them. "You are such a bloke."

A klaxon blared. The Doctor immediately perked up, distracted from his companions and their strange antics. "That sounds like an alarm," he commented.

Solana smiled. "Just a siren announcing the end of the work shift," she replied.

"Ah," the Doctor said, and let it drop. He wasn't fooled. She was quick on her feet, but she was lying all the same.

Solana stood on a platform behind a clear podium, in front of a Warholesque representation of several Ood. Personally, the Doctor thought that the painting of soup cans was more tasteful.

"Here at the double 'O', that's Ood Operations, we like to think of the Ood as trusted friends. We keep the Ood healthy, safe, and educated. We don't just breed the Ood, we make them better. Because at heart, what is an Ood, but a reflection of us?"

He struggled to keep his composure. He'd heard variations of that logic on a thousand planets, and every time it rang false. The Ood were trusted friends that weren't worth paying for their services, they kept them healthy and happy and doing the most degrading jobs so that human beings wouldn't have to bother with them. The 'make them better' line was especially galling. Only a few thousand years before humans had used this same logic to justify members of their own species—because they looked different.

The crowd was clapping for Solana. The Doctor glanced at Rose. She was just short of glaring at the woman. Obviously she thought there were a few holes in their reasoning. Donna was also looking less-than-enthusiastic.

"That's bollox," Rose murmured to them. "You heard what Danny called them, Doctor. Cattle. Useless." She jutted her chin at the rest of the people. "I don't think his attitude is all that uncommon."

They mingled for a while, examining the infopacks they'd been given and making small talk with the other prospective buyers. Rose was bored quickly. Rich people, it seemed, never changed. She knew that she was being unfair, but it was hard to like these people when they were openly condoning and participating in slave trade. The knowledge made her skin crawl.

Solana's voice broke through her thoughts. The woman stood in front of three Ood. "I'd now like to draw your attention to a new innovation from Ood Operations. We've introduced a variety package with the Ood translator ball." She asked each Ood how they were doing, and received an answer in the standard form—'very well, thank you,' and one that was geared toward men—a feminine voice that replied 'all the better for seeing you.' The third Ood made a noise like Homer Simpson when Solana pointed out that he dropped something.

Rose felt ill. How much of what they were saying did the Ood control? If you could modify the translator ball—all for five additional credits—weren't you modifying the Ood itself? How would it feel to be screaming and know that no one could even understand you, or that if they could, they wouldn't care? She knew about not caring, but at least she'd been able to scream. At least her mouth wasn't betraying her with every word. It sounded, she thought, like one of the most horrifying things
The Doctor wandered over to Solana's podium. He pressed a few buttons, and the screen changed from the garishly painted Ood to a realistic depiction of a galaxy. "The Ood sphere," he said, pointing at one of the planets orbiting a star. "That's where we are." He slipped his brainy specs on. "I've been to this system before, years ago—ages really. Close to the planet Sense-sphere." He pressed a few more buttons. Red dots peppered the screen, connected by thin red lines. "It's the year 4126," he noted. "The Second Great and Bountiful human empire."

"I'm in 4126?" Donna asked, eyes shining.

The Doctor grinned. "Yes you are."

"That's brilliant!" she exclaimed. "What's the Earth like now."

"Bit full," the Doctor replied, "but the Empire stretches out across three galaxies."

Donna stared at the screen. "It's weird, brilliant mind you, but back home the papers are always talkin like we haven't got long to live: global warming, flooding, all the bees disappearing…"

The Doctor frowned. "Yeah, that thing about the bees is odd."

Rose shrugged. "It's like you said on Platform One. No one ever considers that we might live." She turned to Donna. "There are humans all over the universe, past the year five billion."

"Up to the year one hundred trillion, actually," the Doctor commented. "Right to the end of the universe itself."

"Is that good or bad, though?" Donna wanted to know. "Are we explorers, or more like a virus?"

A humorless smile flitted across the Doctor's face. "Sometimes I wonder."

"What are the red dots?" Rose asked, as much to draw the conversation away from an uncomfortable topic as to satisfy her curiosity.

"Ood distribution centers."

Donna raised an eyebrow. "Don't the Ood get a say in this?"

Rose shook her head. "Like I said before—slaves. I tried asking them about payment on the sanctuary base and the Ood I talked to didn't seem to know what money was." She frowned. "Although that could have just been the translator ball speaking."

The Doctor held up a sheet from the infopacks. "I've had enough schmoozing. What do you two say to a bit of exploring?"

"Rough guide to the Ood sphere?" Donna asked, grinning. "Suits me."

Rose laced her fingers through his. "Let's take a look behind the curtain."
The sonic screwdriver got them out of the guest-approved area. Donna was glad to be gone—the falseness of the setup disgusted her. Did anyone in that room actually believe Solana's speech about making the Ood 'better?' As if being enslaved was a good thing! And the Doctor had as much as admitted that he hadn't questioned the system at all when he first encountered it. She wondered what could have been going on that kept him from interfering, from even noticing.

They were standing on a platform two stories in the air when a computerized voice stated that "Ood shift eight" was about to begin. A long double-column of Ood marched from one of the warehouses to another building in the complex. One of the Ood stumbled and fell. A nearby human strode over to him and pulled out what looked to be a—yes, it was—a whip.

"Get up!" the man yelled, and cracked the whip. The Ood struggled to rise. "I said get up!" The man lashed him, the leather cutting through the dark gray cloth of the Ood's shirt.

Donna felt ill again. "They're not servants, they're slaves." She noticed that Rose was pale as well.

"It wasn't this bad," she began, but stopped. "At least, it didn't seem like this."

"I didn't ask," the Doctor replied. "Last time I met the Ood. I never thought." His jaw was set and his eyes were fixed on the lines of Ood marching below, watched over by men with whips and guns.

"That's not like you," Donna said. "Can't seem to stop you asking."

"There was the Beast," the Doctor snapped back, "and the small matter of escaping from a planet that was about to fall into a black hole." His voice softened. "I only had time for one trip. I had to let the Ood die." He straightened. "Reckon I owe them one."

"That's more like it," Donna said.

Rose nodded at the courtyard below, where several figures in suits were making their way across. "That looks like the boss."

The Doctor turned back the way they came. "Let's stay away from him."

A loud whistle brought the Doctor out of his thoughts. Donna and Rose were standing next to a door in one of the metal warehouses. The Doctor winced. "Blimey, Donna, where'd you learn whistle?"

"West Ham, every Saturday," she replied with a grin. "Granddad likes to watch the matches." Rose grinned, but said nothing. She'd like to meet Donna's granddad. He sounded like an interesting man, and he'd have to be formidable to raise a girl like her. The Doctor soniced the door open, and then went inside. Huge containers like giant metal boxes were stacked everywhere. Machines like claws ran along tracks in the ceiling. They lifted and carried boxes out of sight.
"Ood export," the Doctor explained. "See? Those things take the containers to the rocket ships."

"And there's Ood in there?" Donna's voice was incredulous.

"Oh yes," the Doctor replied. He buzzed one of the containers with the screwdriver and pulled the door open. Rows of Ood stood inside, facing them. Donna wrinkled her nose as she stepped inside.

"It stinks."

Rose felt ill. There wasn't enough room to sit, let alone fit a bathroom. They were trapped in this little box standing in their own filth. And she didn't see food or water. How long would they be expected to stay like this?

"How many d'you think there are in each one?" Donna asked the Doctor.

He shrugged. "A hundred, more maybe." His tone was casual, but the look in his eyes was not as he studied the container. A muscle in his jaw twitched.

"A great big empire built on slavery." Disgust colored the redhead's voice.

"Not so different from your time," the Doctor commented. "The more things change, the more they stay the same."

"Oi!" Donna objected. "I don't have slaves."

"Who made your clothes?" he bit back.

"Now listen here," Donna began, but Rose interrupted her.

"He's right, though. A bit, anyway. Give kids in sweatshops pennies a day and people can feel good about themselves—they're not slaves, they're getting paid, but it's just as bad." She bit her lip, remembering how much she'd taken her life before the Doctor for granted: having enough food, being able to do what she wanted when she wanted. She couldn't imagine living like the Ood. And she'd patronized places that bought from sweatshops, hell, she'd worked there and complained about how she was treated as an employee. She'd never thought about where the clothes came from, or what went into making them. What right did she have to complain when people were being treated like this?

"So is that why you like having humans with you?" Donna asked the Doctor sarcastically. "Not so you can show them the universe, but so you can take cheap shots?"

He blinked. "Sorry."

"Yeah, well don't." Her expression softened a bit. "Spaceman." She looked at the Ood, who stood just as they had when the three of them entered the box. "I don't understand," she said, glancing back at the warehouse behind them. "The door's open. Why don't you just go?"

"For what purpose?" one of the Ood asked, its translator ball glowing.

Donna gaped. "For freedom," she said finally.

"I do not understand the concept," the same Ood replied.

Rose stared at the translator. "Doctor, what is it with that ball?" she asked. "They can't be born like that."
The Doctor was still staring at the Ood. "Tell me, does 'the circle' mean anything to you?"

As one they replied, "the circle must be broken."

Goosebumps ran up Rose's arms and she moved closer to the Doctor. She grasped his hand tightly. The last time the Ood had spoken in tandem the Beast had been controlling them.

"That is creepy," Donna commented.

"But what is it?" he pressed. "What is 'the circle'?"

"The circle must be broken," was the only response he received.

He sighed in frustration. "But why?"

"So that we can sing," the Ood replied.

After a death-defying chase, a significant amount of running, being captured and escaping, and more running, Rose, the Doctor, and Donna ended up outside a warehouse that Solana had identified as 'Ood Processing.' Rose was still angry at Solana. The young woman was obviously intelligent and she knew that what happened to the Ood was wrong, but she had decided to remain on the company's side. Instead of coming with them and helping with the sudden rash of Ood-gone-berserk she had alerted soldiers to their presence.

The Doctor aimed the sonic at the door. "Oh, can you hear it?" he asked Donna and Rose. "I didn't need the map! I should have listened!" Donna looked confused, but Rose nodded. It was there again —the same song she'd heard in the mountains, the song the Ood had sung when he was dying. The door slid open and they hurried inside. The Doctor wrecked the controls once it closed.

"Aren't we locked in, then?" Donna asked.

The Doctor ignored her. "Listen," he repeated. "Listen listen listen."

"I hear it," Rose said from his right.

"Hear what?" Donna wanted to know, but neither of them replied. Instead they set off into the darkness of the warehouse, following a sound only they could hear.

The Doctor winced as they descended a flight of stairs. "Oh, my head."

"What is it?" Donna was concerned.

"Can't you hear it?" Rose asked. "The singing? You must be able to." Her eyes were watering from the force of it. "It's so loud." Donna shook her head.

The Doctor shone the torch he carried at the barred wall opposite them. It wasn't a wall. It was part of a cage, and inside the cage, were Ood. They were crouched on the ground, holding something in their hands. Rose found a light switch, and the Ood looked up as the room brightened. When they saw the humans in front of them they pulled into a circle with their backs facing out.

Donna frowned. "They look different than the others."

"They're natural Ood," Rose replied.

The Doctor nodded. "They haven't been processed yet—adapted to slavery. They're unspoiled." The
three of them approached the cage door. "That's their song that we've been hearing," he continued. "The sound of their minds reaching out."

Donna bit her lip. "I can't hear it," she said sadly.

The Doctor looked at her. "D'you want to?"

She turned her head to look at him. "Yeah," she said after a minute.

"It's the song of captivity," he reminded her.

She tilted her chin up. "I want to hear it."

He looked to Rose. "D'you want to as well?"

She shook her head. "All ready do, thanks."

He looked like he wanted to question her, but instead he turned back to Donna. "Face me."

She knelt on the ground across from him. The Doctor stretched out his hands and placed one on either side of her forehead. He closed his eyes. Music filled Donna's mind. It was strange—definitely alien, but beautiful and breathtakingly sad. She opened her eyes and stared at the creatures before her. She'd been repulsed by the Ood's appearance, but the sheer beauty and sorrow of their song rocked her very being, and she was ashamed. "Take it away," she gasped. "I'm sorry, but please, take it away. I can't bear it." Tears dripped down her face. The Doctor nodded and replaced his hands. The music faded. They were silent for a moment. "You still hear that?" she finally asked.

"All the time," the Doctor replied. He looked at Rose. "And you?" She nodded. "That shouldn't be possible." He studied her, lips drawn tight in concentration.

"I hear the TARDIS too," she said softly. "Singin in my head." His eyes widened.

The screech of metal tearing rang through the room. Donna glanced up. "They're breaking in!"

The Doctor was busy breaking into the cell containing the Ood. "Let them," he said over his shoulder as the lock clicked and the door opened. Donna glanced over her shoulder again as she followed Rose and the Doctor inside. "What are you holding?" he asked the Ood. They shied away.

"'S alright," Rose said as she eased forward slowly. "I'm Rose, and this is the Doctor and our friend Donna." She smiled at the Ood. "We're here to help. You can show us."

"Friend," the Doctor added and gestured to himself. "Doctor, Donna, Rose—friend." The Ood moved forward slowly, something still clasped in his hands. "That's it," the Doctor continued. "Go on." The Ood studied them for a bit, before he opened his hands.

Donna gasped. "Is that—is that a brain?"

"A hindbrain," the Doctor confirmed. "The Ood are born with a secondary brain—like the amygdala in humans. It processes emotions and memories. Take that away, and you wouldn't be you anymore." Anger crept into his voice.

"Like a lobotomy," Rose added, pale. "They cut off their brain and stitch the translator ball on." Fury was building inside her, coiling hot and pulsing in her stomach. No one deserved that—to have everything that made them an individual stripped away. It would be a half-life. No wonder processed Ood maintained they had no purpose but to serve—the part of them that could have conceived of
such a purpose had been taken from them.

"That's sick!" Donna cried. She looked around the cage, tears dripping down her face again. "I spent all that time looking for you, Doctor, because I thought it would be wonderful out here." She paused. "But it's not. It's just not."

"Not always," Rose replied. "But that's the universe. It's huge and beautiful and terrible, all at once. And you want to think that people are better than that, but we're not, not all of us." She paused. "But not everyone is this bad, either. Some days are wonderful. Some days everyone lives and there's no running for your life at all."

A crash from above interrupted her and voices echoed down the stairwell. She sighed. "And then some days you can't save everyone and you end up in prison for your troubles."

The nearly-bald man in the fancy suit sneered at The Doctor, Rose, and Donna as his goons locked their handcuffs around a series of pipes running from the floor to the ceiling. "Why don't you just come out and say it—FOTO Activists!"

"If that's what Friends of the Ood are trying to prove, then yes!" the Doctor snapped back.

"The Ood were nothing without us," he replied. "Just animals roaming around on the ice."

Rose snorted. "Yeah, and a few thousand years ago white people said that about black people. It wasn't true then, and it's sure as hell not true now!"

"You can't hear them!" the Doctor gritted out.

"They welcomed it!" he continued. "It's not like they put up a fight!"

Donna glared at him. "You idiot," she spat. "They're born with their brains in their hands! Of course they're peaceful! Creature like that would have to trust everyone they meet!"

The Doctor nodded. "Good one, Donna."

"The system has worked for two hundred years," the man said as he rose, frowning.

"Yeah, and how long did slavery work?" Rose snapped. "Just 'cause that's how it is doesn't make it right!"

He ignored her. "All we've got is a rogue batch, but the infection is about to be sterilized."

"Sterilized?" the Doctor asked. "What do you mean?"

The man grinned without humor. "Kill the livestock. The classic foot-and-mouth solution. Still works."

"Except that Ood aren't cattle!" Donna screeched. "They're people! You're killing people! They have emotions and hopes and dreams just like you and you've decided that since you can't understand them they don't count, but you're wrong!"

A klaxon cut through the air. The man in the suit started. "What the hell?" He grabbed a radio from the table. "What's going on?"

"It's the Ood, sir!" a frightened voice crackled. "They've gone mad! The wolf is at the door, I repeat, the wolf is at the door!"
The scientist standing next to the man in the suit turned pale. "It's a revolution."

The man threw the radio across the room. "Well, Doctor, you're going to get what you wanted. I expect there will be full inquiry after this mess is cleaned up." He began to pace. "Can't risk a bullet to the head," he muttered, and then stopped, a strange smile spreading across his face. "I'll leave you to the mercy of the Ood."

He turned to leave, but the Doctor spoke. "There's something else, isn't there. Something we haven't seen."

The man stopped and stared. "What do you mean?"

"A creature couldn't survive with a separate fore and hind brain. He'd be at war with himself constantly. There's got to be something else, a third element binding the two together."

The man smiled again without humor. "So clever."

The Doctor strained against the handcuffs. "It's got to be connected to the red eye. Let me go with you, I can help!"

The man laughed. "It won't exist much longer." He turned slightly wild eyes on Donna and Rose. "Enjoy your Ood." And then he was gone.

"Come on!" the Doctor bit out as he pulled against the cuffs.

"Don't you have any tricks?" Donna asked. "Didn't you meet Houdini?"

The Doctor made a face. "These are really good cuffs."

"Well, at least we've got quality!" Donna snarked. "We're all about to die, but hey, the cuffs are great!"

"What about the sonic?" Rose asked as she pulled against the cold metal.

The Doctor shook his head. "Left pocket, but your hands won't reach the bottom of my pockets. Bigger on the inside, remember?"

Rose groaned. "Never thought I'd be sorry about that."

The Doctor's lips quirked into a smile. "Me neither."

The door slid open, and three Ood stepped inside. Their eyes were blood red.

"The circle must be broken!" Donna cried.

"Doctor, Donna, Rose, friends!" the Doctor added.

The Ood advanced.

"Please, we're friends!" Rose begged.

"Friends friends friends!" the Doctor agreed.

The Ood advanced.

"Doctor, Donna, Rose, friends!" the Doctor continued to chant.
"The circle must be broken!" Donna added.

The Ood advanced, and then stopped. They put their hands to their head, as if to block out a noise. They shuddered for a few moments, and when they raised their head again their eyes were back to normal.

"Doctor, Donna, Rose, friends," one of the Ood repeated.
The world was falling apart around them. Rose kept her eyes open and her head down as they dashed into the courtyard. Bullets flew through the air, the wind sent snow flurrying about them, and agonized shouts signaled another person felled by an Ood translator ball. Somehow they were using it as a weapon. Her Torchwood training kept her head clear and her breathing steady. First order of business was to find whatever the Doctor had called the 'third element,' the thing that bound the Ood into a cohesive whole—as a society and as individuals.

"I don't know where it is!" the Doctor yelled in frustration. The chaos surged around them. "I don't know where they've gone!"

"What are we looking for?" She kept her voice calm. No use all of them losing their heads.

The Doctor grabbed his hair as he spun on the spot. "It might be underground—like some sort of cavern or cave or—I don't know!"

Gunshots ricocheted off the wall behind them. "We can't stay here!" Rose yelled. "This way!" They darted around buildings until they found a somewhat shielded place. Donna leaned over, her hands on her knees, to catch her breath. Rose raised her arms above her head—expanding her lungs, giving her body more room to fill with oxygen. The Doctor bounced from foot to foot, impatient as always. His 'superior physiology' meant that he was hardly out of breath at all.

An explosion to their left sent all three of them face-first into the snow. Rose slapped her hands on the ground loudly, cushioning her fall. The Doctor popped his head up. "All right?" he asked. Rose nodded. Donna groaned. "Donna?"

"Alright, alright," she grumbled. They pulled back, getting to their feet as the dust cleared. An Ood stood before them, a very familiar Ood, the same Ood who had been following the man in the suit around every time they saw him.

The Ood, designated Ood Sigma, led them to one of the warehouses. He gestured for them to enter. "Warehouse 15, eh?" the Doctor muttered as he applied the sonic to the controls. "What are you hiding?"

A strange crackling sound filled the air inside Warehouse 15. On the first floor it seemed like an ordinary storage space, but once they reached the basement it was anything but normal. Reddish emergency lights flickered on the walls. It was—eerie. The Doctor charged down the stairs and skidded to a stop on the catwalk that wound around the building, from the stairs off into the shadows. His knuckles were white as he gripped the railing. Rose gasped. The singing was back, louder and clearer than ever before. Donna blinked.

"I can hear it!" she cried. "I can hear the singing."
The Doctor nodded. "It's the Ood brain—the third element, the telepathic center. It all makes sense now: forebrain, hindbrain, and this. It's a shared mind," he explained, "connecting all the Ood in song."

"So they're what, a hive mind?" Rose asked.

"Sort of like that, yeah," the Doctor replied. "They're a collective race. The shared mind means that every Ood can access the memories and experiences of every other Ood who has ever been connected to the mind." He leaned back. "It's fairly impressive, actually, and highly sophisticated."

The sound of a gun being cocked was loud in the relative quiet of the warehouse. "Cargo," the man in the suit said, emerging from his hiding place. "I can always go into cargo. I've got the rockets already, and the sheds. It'll be a smaller business, more manageable than livestock."

"They're not animals," Donna snarled, "they're people too."

The Doctor shifted, drawing Donna behind him. He tried to angle himself to shield Rose as well, but she refused to let him. He squeezed her hand and tried again. She did not move. Why was she so stubborn? He had two regenerations left. If she was shot in the wrong place she'd be gone. Dead. And there was no way that he was going to lose her again, not now, not when he'd gotten her back.

The same scientist who had been with the man in the suit earlier was following behind him. "He's mined the area," the scientist said, gesturing to small, disk-like explosives that lined the catwalk and wall of the building.

"You're going to kill it?" Rose asked, anger lending an edge to her voice.

"They found that thing centuries ago," the man in the suit sneered, "beneath the Northern Glacier."

The Doctor nodded in grim satisfaction. "Those pylons," he said. "In the shape of a circle."

"The circle must be broken?" Donna supplied. Another nod.

"It dampens the telepathic field. It's stopped the Ood from connecting for two hundred years." A muscle in his jaw twitched. He knew that kind of loneliness; he dealt with it on a daily basis. Time Lords were telepathic, and although he disliked most of his people, their presence in his head had been a comforting reminder that he was not alone, no matter how far he was from Gallifrey. Now the silence was so profound that it echoed within him. His isolation was necessary. Theirs was not.

As if she could sense the direction his thoughts were taking, Rose squeezed his hand. The pressure returned him to the present and he glared at the man in the suit.

The man, however, was ignoring him, and focused instead on their guide. "You led them here, Ood Sigma. I expected better."

"My place is at your side, sir," the Ood replied, and crossed the catwalk to join the man.

He chuckled. "Still subservient. Good Ood." Rose frowned. His face was—off, like he was choking almost, but not.

"If that barrier's still in place," Donna asked the Doctor, "how come the Ood started breaking out?"

The Doctor shrugged, his eyes also on the man in the suit. "Maybe it took them two hundred years to evolve around it—the subconscious reaching out."
The scientist spoke up. "The process was too slow. It had to be accelerated." He stepped forward, grinning wolfishly. "You should never have given me access to the controls, sir," he said to the man in the suit. "I lowered the barrier to its minimum. Friends of the Ood, you see. Took me ten years to infiltrate your company, and I succeeded."

The man in the suit stared at him. "Yes, you did." And then he grabbed the scientist by his lab coat and thrust him over the railing of the catwalk. The Doctor made a grab for him, but it was too late. The scientist plunged down and into the giant, pulsating brain that was the Ood's telepathic center. Bits of flesh shifted and squelched as the scientist's body vanished from sight. Donna gagged and Rose felt the color draining away. What a horrible way to die.

When they looked back at the man in the suit he was aiming the gun at them. "Never shot anyone before. Can't say I'll like it, but needs must." His arm shook, and he looked like he was going to be sick.

Ood Sigma stepped out from behind him. "Have a drink, sir."

The man waved it away. "Now is hardly the time."

"Please, sir, have a drink." The Ood was persistent. He moved to stand in front of the Doctor, Rose, and Donna.

The man in the suit frowned. "If... if you're gonna... stand... in the way..." He seemed to be having trouble controlling his facial expressions. "I'll shoot... you too."

"Please have a drink, sir." The Doctor put his hand on the Ood's shoulder. Ood Sigma did not move, nor did the man in the suit shoot. Instead, he dropped the gun.

"Have—have you poisoned me?" he asked, eyes wide.

"Natural Ood must not kill, sir," Ood Sigma replied.

The Doctor's eyebrows shot towards his hairline. "What is that stuff?" he asked.

"Ood graft suspended in a biological compound, sir," Ood Sigma answered.

The Doctor laughed. Rose gasped. Donna's jaw dropped. The man in the suit was not amused. "What does that mean!" he yelled. "Tell me!"

"Funny thing, the subconscious," the Doctor began, his eyes bright and his smile manic and triumphant and edged with something darker. "Takes all kinds of forms. It came out as revenge, with the red eye, as anger with the rabid Ood, and then there's patience. All that intelligence and mercy focused on Ood Sigma." He leaned closer to the man in the suit, a predatory glint in his eye. "They've been preparing you for a long time. And now you're here, right next to the telepathic center!" He threw his arms out. "Tell me, can you hear it? The music? Just listen," the Doctor ordered with blistering intensity. "Listen."

The man in the suit began to shake. He looked for a moment like he was having a seizure, but when Donna protested the Doctor waved her off, his eyes fixed on the man. He clutched his head and his fingernails scraped at his skin. Revulsion bubbled up in Rose's throat as his skin came away in his hands like a banana peel. Beneath was the smooth, off white orb of an Ood's head. Tentacles dropped from his mouth, and after a choking cough a hindbrain sat in his hands.

"They turned him into an Ood!" Donna gasped.
"Yep," the Doctor agreed, grinning.

"But, he's an Ood!" she continued.

"Yes, I saw," he replied, amusement shining through.

"He is Oodkind now," Ood Sigma said as he joined what used to be the man in the suit. "We will care for him."

Donna held her head as if it ached. She took a deep breath, and turned to the Doctor. "It's weird—being with you two I can't tell what's right and what's wrong anymore."

Rose nodded. "I know what you mean."

The Doctor put an arm around each of them. "But that's good! The people who do know for certain are usually like him." He jutted his chin at the newly-made Ood.

"Turned into an Ood?" Rose asked, a small smile on her lips.

"What? No, they—" He looked at her closely and then grinned. "You're having me on again!"

"Doctor, what about the circle?" Donna brought his attention back to the matter at hand.

"Right!" He raced over to the controls. "Sigma, if I may do the honors?"

The Ood bowed. "It is yours, sir."

"Oh yes!" the Doctor yelled in triumph as he pointed the sonic at the control panel. "Stifle for two hundred years, but no more!" Sparks shot from the metal and the crackle of energy cut off suddenly. "The Ood can sing!"

A strange melody filled the air. Where once had been sorrow, pain, a desperate longing, there was joy. Rose could feel it sweep through her like a summer wind, warm and comforting. It left her with the urge to dance, to throw up her hands and do jumping jacks. She was grinning like a loon, and she knew that the Doctor and Donna were as well. His hand found hers and she glanced back at him. He was wearing a smile just for her, the kind she saw when he did something unexpectedly brilliant, or everyone lived, or he managed to get her out of her nickers blindfolded. He was beautiful when he smiled, like he was lit from within. She would do anything to keep that look on his face.

"I can hear it!" Donna cried. Her face was turned up in wonder. She understood, in this moment, why he kept traveling, why he didn't just settle down on some planet with Rose and say to hell with the universe. There were dark days, horrible days, but then—then there were times like this, when the song of the Ood echoed around them and it felt like the universe itself was singing.

All over the compound Ood stopped. They laid down their weapons, fastened their translator balls to their jackets, and lifted their hands in song. The music swelled around them and even the least telepathically receptive human understood.

Ood Sigma insisted on walking the Doctor, Rose, and Donna back to the TARDIS.

"The message has gone out," the Doctor said as they stood in front of his ship. "That song resonated across the galaxies. Everyone knows. The Ood are coming home."

"We thank you," Sigma said, "Doctor, Rose, Donna, friends of Oodkind." He paused. "Where will
you go now? Will you stay? There is room in the song for you."

The Doctor glanced down at Rose and smiled. "Thank you, but I have a song of my own."

"I think your song must end soon," Sigma replied.


Sigma only looked at them and replied, "every song must end." Rose hugged the Doctor's arm, and the Ood turned to her. "They are returning," he said.

"How do I stop them?" she asked. She knew what he was referring to, what Evelina had spoken of in Pompeii.

"You have what you need," Sigma replied. "You will know when it is time."

"Who is returning?" the Doctor asked. "Rose, what is he talking about?"

She squeezed his hand and gave him her most convincing smile. "Nothing important." He didn't buy it. They made their farewells, and then went into the TARDIS. Behind them the Ood lifted their hands once more and sang them on their way.

Donna was off to the kitchen for a cup of tea, and Rose made her way to her room. The Doctor followed her. "How long have you been able to hear the TARDIS?" he asked after she closed her door.

She shrugged. "Ages. Ever since Satellite five."

"The first or second time?" his voice was strained.

"Second," she replied quietly. "At first I thought it was nothing, that she was just getting to know me better, but then—" He moved closer to her. She hugged herself and he put a hand on either arm just below her shoulders. He rubbed her arms, and she leaned into him. "Then I remembered."

"How much?" He almost held his breath waiting for her answer.

"Everything." He closed his eyes, remorse and guilt tearing through him. "It was Torchwood. They thought the secret to my staying young might be in my head, so they brought in a telepath." A choked laugh bubbled out of her throat. "The reports said she died screaming."

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm so sorry."

"I can hear them dying when I close my eyes," she said, her voice detached and clinical. "Half a million Daleks screaming as they were wiped from existence—turned to dust. And I did that."

"Oh Rose." He pulled her to him tightly, wrapping his arms around her. She stiffened, and then gradually relaxed. Her shoulders shook in silent sobs. "No one should have to remember that," he murmured. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"And I killed you." Her voice was brittle with pain.

"You saved me, and the Earth," he reminded her. "The Daleks would have killed me until I had no more regenerations left."
"You should have let me burn," she replied.

"No!" he snapped. "No, Rose. A regeneration is a small price to pay." He stroked her hair and murmured endearments she did not understand. "You found me when I was broken and hurting and you made me better," he said finally, after her shoulder stopped shaking and her breathing had evened out. "Losing you almost destroyed me. Ask Donna. I was a proper mess when she showed up." Her arms were tight around him. "What you did—I never thought anyone would do something like that for me. I was terrified, Rose. I was terrified for you, of how you made—make—me feel. I thought that I was going to lose you, that your death would be my fault." He pulled back just enough to look into her eyes. "Please promise me that you won't do anything like that again."

"Promise you'll never send me away," she challenged. He was silent. She sighed. "That's the condition, Doctor. I'll stop rescuing you if you stop needing to be rescued."

He held her. "I can't promise that I never will," he finally responded. "But I can promise that I'll try." His voice was hesitant, almost afraid. "Can that be enough?"

She pondered for a while before she relaxed in his arms. "Yeah. It can."
"Where's himself, then?" Donna asked Rose as she entered the kitchen the next morning (or what passed for morning on the TARDIS).

"Console room," Rose responded with a smile. "TARDIS needs a bit a' love."

"He do that often?" The ginger woman fixed herself a cup of tea and put two slices of bread in the toaster.

Rose shrugged. Two mugs sat in front of her on the kitchen table, accompanied by two plates of eggs and four slices of toast, two of which were heavily coated in marmalade. "When Jack was here it seemed like the two of them were happiest hip-deep in wires and gears."

"Is that the same Captain Jack you were talking about earlier?" Donna asked curiously.

Rose nodded. "Oh yes. Next time we're out of milk we can stop by Cardiff and see him."

"Is he really \textit{that} gorgeous?" Donna wanted to know.

The blonde woman pulled a worn leather wallet out of her pocket. "Got a picture of him here, just have to find it." The wallet was full of clear plastic photo-protectors, and each of them contained a picture. She flipped to the back, found what she was looking for, and held it out to Donna, who studied it carefully. It was of a man, a very handsome man if she did say so herself. Black hair framed a face with sparkling blue eyes and a wide, movie-star smile. He looked like an action hero.

Donna whistled. "Now he's a bit of alright."

"Yeah," Rose replied dreamily. "He's a terminal flirt, you know. We met him in London, 1941." The story of what they were doing during the height of the London Blitz followed, along with several other Jack-related stories.

"I definitely have to meet this man," Donna declared after she finally stopped laughing.

"You two would get along like a house on fire," Rose agreed.

"There's one thing I don't understand," the ginger woman asked, her expression thoughtful. "The Doctor didn't seem to like him much. Why did he invite him on board?"

Rose looked down into her mug. "I asked him to. He would have saved Jack anyway—wasn't about to let him dying ruin one of the rare days when everyone lives—but if I hadn't asked he would have dropped him back in the 51st century and let him find his own way." She shrugged. "But he saved our lives, in the end, and anyway," she paused. "He's like the Doctor." Donna looked confused. The two of them sounded nothing alike. "They're good men, two of the best men that I've ever met, but they forget that sometimes." She was staring at the kitchen wall, her eyes fixed on something that only she could see. "Sometimes they need to be reminded."
"Who's that other bloke?" Donna asked, and nodded at the opposite picture. Jack was in that one too, next to Rose and an unfamiliar man.

Rose glanced at it and her expression softened into a sweet smile. "That's how the Doctor looked when I first met him."

He wasn't bad looking, Donna decided, although cutting his hair that short did nothing for his ears, which stuck out from his head like flags. His nose was beak-like but he had exceptional cheekbones and an intensity about him that burned. Jack was looking at whoever was holding the camera, as was Rose, but the Doctor was looking at her. A smile identical to the one Rose was now wearing curved his lips. Oh, he had it bad. They both did. She let the silence stretch out for a moment, and then broke in. "So, repairs?"

Rose blinked. "Right." She smiled ruefully. "I'm rubbish at that stuff, so when it was just us he'd do it while I slept. He doesn't need much sleep," she elaborated. "An hour or two a night and he's good to go. But now..." her voice trailed off and she blushed.

Donna gave her a wicked grin. "I'm surprised you haven't gotten paper cuts from that skinny streak of nothing."

Rose giggled. "You should have seen him before."

"Before what?"

She paused. "I should probably wait for the Doctor to tell you, but if it's anything like when we first traveled together you won't hear about it until its happening." Her voice was light, but there was a sharp edge of bitterness to it. "There's this thing that Time Lords can do—that's what he is, a Time Lord—when they're dying. It's a way to cheat death, but they have to change. Every single cell gets rewritten; they get a whole new body, and they act differently too."

Donna frowned. "How do you mean?"

Rose sipped her tea. "Before he was prickly and sarcastic and brooding. Now," she smiled. "Well, you've heard the gob on him, and he's manic and bouncy. My first Doctor would have died before he let someone catch him bouncing." Her eyebrows pulled together in a little frown of irritation. "The flirting hasn't changed, though. First time he took me somewhere he ended up flirting with a sentient tree," she said dryly. "After she called me a prostitute."

"No way!" Donna exclaimed, eyes wide.

Rose nodded. "Oh yes. Can't blame him, though. We'd only just met. Of course, I did save his life." She leaned forward conspiratorially. "Gymnastics. Very handy. He was completely useless and got himself caught and restrained while a blob of living plastic very nearly took over the world."

The Doctor, of course, chose that minute to swan in from the console room. "Oi! I most certainly was not useless! Who saved Mickey?"

"Me!" Rose fired back. "You didn't even care about him enough to get his name right!"

"Mickey, Rickey, close enough," the Doctor said as he plopped down into the seat next to Rose and promptly snagged a mug and a plate. "Who saved your life in the basement of Henrik's then?" he asked around a mouthful of toast and marmalade. "Those dummies would have made quick work of you if I hadn't been there."

"Hold on," Donna broke in. "Who's Mickey?"
"Old friend," Rose replied as the Doctor said "ex-boyfriend."

Donna raised an eyebrow. "Am I gonna meet him too?"

Rose looked away, her lips drawn into a tight line. "He isn't around anymore," the Doctor said quietly. "And anyway, what do you mean 'too'? Who else are you going to be meeting?"

"Rose was just telling me about Captain Jack," Donna responded.

The Doctor rolled his eyes. "Great. Then the three of you can gang up on me. It'll be like Sarah Jane all over again!" The tense expression on Rose's face dissolved into a smile.

"You deserved that," she replied.

"Wait a minute, who is Sarah Jane?" Donna wanted to know.

"Former companion," the Doctor said as Rose replied "ex-girlfriend." The Doctor glared at her and Rose stared right back, one eyebrow raised in challenge.

Donna looked from one to the other. "You two are bonkers!" She said finally, and it was true. At least part of the reason that she wanted to travel with the Doctor was because he was so much more interesting than anyone else she'd ever met. And the way he looked the last time she saw him—once she calmed down and had time to process what had happened she realized how broken he had looked. Now he had the woman he loved back, and Donna wanted to know what they had that could break him without her. Lance's betrayal had hurt, had left her without the energy to get out of bed for a few days, but she bounced back relatively quickly. She wondered sometimes if the Doctor would have stopped if she hadn't been there. Something in Donna told her that he would have stood there on that balcony until the water overtook him. Something in Donna told her that he would have welcomed it.

As was his custom, the Doctor's mood shifted suddenly and he was all light and breezy again. "Mad as a hatter," he replied. "And how did we get on this topic anyway?"

"Rose was telling me about Regeneration," Donna replied, her voice sharp. "All of the times we were in potentially fatal danger, and you didn't think to tell me?"

He winced. "Right. Yes. I probably should have, but I hoped there wouldn't be a need. I rather like this body, and I'm planning on keeping it for a while." He winked at Rose, who smirked. "But speaking of things you should know," he pushed back from the table and stood. " Into the console room, ladies. It's time you learned how to fly this ship."

"I can't believe I'm really doing this!" Donna cried as she stared at the console, eyes wide. One hand was occupied keeping a lever steady, while the other worked what looked like a bicycle pump.

"Me either," the Doctor muttered as he kept a close eye on her. Rose was in charge of another facet, one she had learned while traveling with him earlier. "Like riding a bicycle," she said when he asked her if she remembered how. "If the bicycle is also a space-and-time ship," he'd replied, but she gave him a Rose smile with her tongue between her teeth and he had waved her over to her customary panel. "Careful!" he snapped as the TARDIS began to shake more than normal. "Left hand, Donna, keep it level! You're getting too close to the 1980's!"

"What, am I gonna put a dent in them?" the woman shot back sarcastically. Rose giggled. The Doctor shot her a disapproving look which she ignored, as usual.
"Someone did," he replied as he studied the view screen. The strange, circular writing that was the Doctor's native language shifted. Donna hoped that it made sense to him, because she was completely lost. To her it looked like a bunch of children's doodles.

The tinny ring of a mobile phone blared over the sound of the TARDIS's engines. The Doctor walked around to a neglected panel and pulled out a slim black package.

"You've got a mobile?" Donna exclaimed. "Since when?"

"It's not mine," the Doctor replied as he stared at it for a moment. Rose recognized the phone. She'd seen it often in the year-that-never-was. The Doctor sat on the jump seat and flipped it open. "Hello?"

"Hello Doctor." Martha Jones's voice crackled over the speaker. "It's Martha, and I'm bringing you back to Earth."
Back to Earth

Chapter Notes

Quotes taken from 'The Sontaran Stratagem.'

Martha Jones thrust her hands into the pockets of her black jacket. She was waiting for the Doctor and, well, her. Rose. She sighed and her breath ghosted through the crisp Autumn air. It was a beautiful day, she thought absently as she scanned the alley once more for any sign of a blue police box. It was the kind of day she spent jumping into leaf-piles when she was small. Her niece was probably doing just that. The corners of her mouth tugged down into a frown, as they always did when she thought about her family. Leo, of course, was fine. He had escaped the Master's notice and thus remembered nothing about the year-that-never-was. She wished that she could be so lucky.

A familiar wheezing groan broke through her thoughts and her frown disappeared. A wind that came from nowhere tossed the leaves at her feet into a cyclone and tugged at the edge of her jacket. The wheezing died down and a battered blue police-box sat in the formerly empty alley. The door creaked open and a familiar figure stepped out. Martha suppressed a grin. He hadn't changed a bit, but then, he never did. He kept his face carefully blank until she smiled at him. His answering grin was as bright an manic as she remembered and he swept her into a hug.

"Martha Jones!" he exclaimed after he put her down. "Look at you! How's the family?"

"Recovering," she answered, serious again. "They send their thanks."

He nodded. "Good, good." He glanced behind his shoulder and smiled. "You remember Rose."

"How could I forget?" She would remember the look on his face until the day that she died. It was worse than the Family, worse than when he was possessed by that sun. It was loss so deep it stole her breath. It was the emptiness of space and the endless pull of black holes. It was not at all how he looked now. A flash of blond caught her eye as Rose joined them. Martha almost didn't recognize her. The hair color threw her, although she remembered Jack referencing that the other woman was blond. It was her clothes that stood out the most. She was wearing jeans and a pink t-shirt under a gray hoodie with 'punky fish' written across the front. She looked so—young, younger than Martha herself, until you looked into her eyes. Something ancient and golden flickered within their depths and for a moment Martha swore she felt the Earth spinning beneath her feet.

Then the Doctor's hand was on her shoulder and he was peering into her eyes, frowning. "All right?"

She shook her head, trying to clear away the strange sensation. "Fine," she responded as it faded away. "Just a bit tired. Been busy." The TARDIS doors squealed as Donna shut them. Martha looked over Rose's shoulder at the ginger woman. A corner of her mouth tugged upwards in a half-smile. "Right. Didn't take you long to replace me, then." She tried for lighthearted joking, but fell flat.

The Doctor straightened. "Now don't start fighting," he warned. "Martha Jones, I'd like you to meet Donna Noble. Donna, this is Martha." The two women shook hands. "Please don't fight; I can't abide fighting."
Rose rolled her eyes. "Like they're going to fight over you," she said, affectionate exasperation coloring her voice. "Bit full of yourself, yeah?"

"You wish," Donna agreed. She grinned at Martha. "I've heard all about you."

Martha looked surprised. "I dread to think!"

"He says nice things," Rose put in. "Loads of them."

"He's told you everything," Martha said with a sigh. She looked a bit flustered and glanced guiltily at Rose.

"Didn't take you long to get over it," Donna noted with a smile. "Who's the lucky man?"

The Doctor frowned. "What? What man?"

"Is it that Tom Milligan?" Rose wanted to know.

"What man?" the Doctor asked again. Rose rolled her eyes and Donna sighed.

"You're hopeless," she informed the alien. "Look at her hand!" She grabbed Martha's left hand and held it up, gesturing to the diamond firmly on her ring finger. "She's engaged, you prawn."

"Oh," the Doctor remarked, his eyes wide. "Right. Congratulations?"

"It's not a question, dumbo!" Donna exclaimed.

Martha laughed and then tension dissipated. "It's Tom, Tom Milligan," she replied. "He's in pediatrics—working out in Africa right now." She sighed. "I know, I know, I've got a Doctor who disappears off to distant places—tell me about it."

"I bet he's a better driver," Rose remarked with a cheeky grin.

"Oi!" the Doctor protested. "There is nothing wrong with my driving!"

"Oh really?" Rose raised an eyebrow in challenge. "So you intended to take me home twelve months late and scare my mother half to death?"

"That was one time!"

Donna grinned. "And you also intended to take us to Pompeii just before the volcano exploded?"

"That had to happen!" he argued.

"Did we have to land on New Earth when it was locked down and the motorway was under attack by gas-eating crabs?" Martha asked, all counterfeit innocence.

The Doctor crossed his arms and pouted. "I think I liked the fighting better," he muttered mutinously. Rose took his hand and smiled at him.

"Wouldn't you just," she teased.

A radio crackled to life at Martha's hip. "Doctor Jones, report to base, please. Over."

"Speaking of which…" She pulled it out. "This is Doctor Jones. Operation Blue Sky is go, go, go. I repeat, this is a go."
The seemingly empty tarmac in front of them sprang into life. Soldiers in black uniforms with red berets poured out of the surrounding buildings and formed two lines on the edges of the road. Jeeps and a semi slowly drove down the middle, surrounded by the troops.

"Unified Intelligence task force!" one of the men shouted at a worker manning the entryway. "Raise that barrier now!"

Martha, Donna, Rose, and the Doctor stood off to the side and let the men pass. They were charging into some sort of industrial complex. Soldiers poured into the buildings.

"All workers lay down your tools and surrender!" the same man shouted over a loudspeaker. "This is a UNIT operation." He turned back to the men. "Keep your safeties on!" he barked. "They're nonhostiles!"

Martha followed the black semi truck into the complex and the others followed her. "Greyhound 6 to Trap 1," she said into the walkie-talkie. "'B' section go, go, go! Search the ground floor, grid pattern delta!" A group of men fanned out into the building. Others stood guard over workers, who kneeled or stood with their hands behind their heads.

"What are you looking for?" the Doctor asked, his face wary as he observed the controlled chaos around them. Donna was looking at Martha differently, as if she was a threat.

"Illegal aliens," the other woman replied. Someone said something over the walkie and Martha darted forward. "'B' section mobilized; 'E' and 'F' sections at my command!"

Donna turned to glare at the Doctor. "Is that what you did to her?" she asked, her voice sharp, "turned her into a soldier?"

"She walked the world for a year and watched a madman destroy everything she'd ever known," Rose replied, her eyes still fixed on their surroundings. "He held her family and her best friend hostage and tried to use them against her. Tends to have an effect on people."

Donna turned her stare onto the other woman. "Is that what happened to you?"

Rose tore her eyes away from the soldiers and looked at Donna. The ginger woman fought the urge to step back. Her face was flat, more than that, empty, but her eyes burned. "A hundred and seventy years in a parallel universe happened to me," she replied in the clipped, level tones of someone who was trying very hard not to explode. Then she turned on her heel and followed Martha into the din.

Donna blinked and focused back on the Doctor. He watched Rose go, his expression bleak. "That's impossible," she said.

"What, the parallel universe bit?" He shook his head. "There are thousands of parallels all around us, Donna. Every choice we make creates a new universe where the opposite occurred."

"Not that! She can't be a hundred and seventy years old."

"She's not," he replied. "She's two hundred and four."

Donna glared at him. "Explain."

He ran his hand through his spiky hair as he watched Rose disappear into the crowd. For a moment Donna thought he was going to snap at her, that he was going to stalk off in pursuit of the blond girl, but he didn't. Instead his shoulders drooped, and when he spoke he sounded tired—old. "When she was nineteen years old," he began, "she met a madman with a box who offered her the universe.
Like any sensible young woman, she said no."

"But how—" Donna interrupted. She shut her mouth when he shot a look at her.

"Then he offered her any when in the universe, and she said yes. She ran away with him and left her normal life of chips and telly and beans on toast behind. She saw the stars up close and met aliens and saved his life, and that old, mad, man with a box found himself falling in love with her." There was a strange intensity in his voice as he spoke, a raw charisma that drew her in, made her see what he said as if it were a movie playing inside her mind. "When she was twenty years old he sent her away, sent her home to save her life. He should have known better, because if he hadn't been so focused on getting her away, on keeping her safe, he would have remembered that she didn't take kindly to being left behind." A strange smile curved his lips. "She ripped open the TARDIS and absorbed the Time Vortex."

Donna looked at him blankly. "The what?"

He sighed. "There's no force in the universe greater than Time," he replied. "And she took all of it, the raw power of Time and space running through her mind. She wanted me safe, and she was willing to die for it."

"But she didn't," Donna pointed out.

He nodded. "No, she didn't. I took the power from her—that's why I regenerated—but there were obviously some side effects. I would have known, but a year later she was gone. I was so happy that she was alive that I put off doing the tests. Told myself I knew her, I would know if something was wrong. She would tell me." He shrugged. "She never got the chance."

"So she's over two hundred years old," Donna continued slowly. He nodded. "Blimey," she said after a while. "Looking good for it. Not quite as good as you do for nine hundred, but close."

"I moisturize," the Doctor replied, humor reasserting itself. He glanced around. "Come on, let's find out what's going on at a factory that would involve UNIT."

Martha and Rose met them in front of one of the corrugated steel buildings a few minutes later. The Doctor blinked, his eyes fixed on her badge. "You're qualified," he said to Martha. "You're a proper doctor."

She smiled and nodded. "UNIT pushed it through. Experience in the field and all that," she said with a significant look in his direction. "Here we go." She gestured for them to follow her. "We're establishing a field base on-site." She grinned over her shoulder at him. "They're dying to meet you."

He made a face and Rose elbowed him. "Ow!" he complained. She did not look sympathetic.

The field base was located inside the black semi-trailer truck they'd noticed when they first arrived. The base was a bit posh, Donna thought as she looked around. The floor was carpeted and the walls were paneled with something that looked like wood. Glass doors separated the trailer into sections. Martha led them into the center section. Three large screens covered one wall and a long row of desks took up most of the space.

"Operation blue sky complete, sir," she said to an older man who was standing behind the desks. "Thanks for letting me take the lead, and this," she smiled at her followers, "is the Doctor." The Time Lord was examining the screens at the front of the room. "Doctor, this is Colonel Mace." The man threw up a crisp salute.
"Sir," he said.

The Doctor frowned. "Oh, don't salute. And don't call me sir. It's the Doctor, just the Doctor."

"Rude again," Rose noted with a grin.

"It's an honor to meet you, sir," Colonel Mace continued. "I've read all the files on you. Technically speaking," he said and a hint of a smile showed through his professional military façade, "you're still on staff. You never resigned."

Donna raised an eyebrow. "What, you used to work for them?"

The Doctor glanced around. "Back in the seventies," he replied absently. "It was all a bit more—homespun then."

"Times have changed, sir," Colonel Mace noted.

"What did I say about calling me 'sir'?” the Doctor reminded him. He brightened. "Is Alastair around? Haven't seen him in ages. I've been meaning to introduce the two of you," he said to Rose. "You'd like him."

"The Brigadier is retired, currently," Colonel Mace replied.

The Doctor scoffed. "He's been saying that for years. Has Doris actually gone and made him quit?"

The Colonel allowed himself a smile. "He acts in an advisory capacity. Once the situation is addressed I'm sure he would welcome a visit."

"You've UNIT in action, Doctor," Martha broke in, trying to steer the conversation back on course. "You were onboard the Valiant. We've got massive funding from the U.N. in the name of homeworld security."

Donna noted the tense looks that accompanied Martha's mention of 'the Valiant,' whatever that was. Clearly the association was not a pleasant one.

"A modern UNIT for a modern world," the Colonel continued as he led them in front of the screens.

Donna bristled. She was used to the Doctor taking the lead, but this was a bit much. And from what he’d said about Martha, she’d expected better of the woman. It was unlike any of them to simply accept what this 'UNIT' organization had done as right. "So that means arresting ordinary factory workers in the streets, in broad daylight?" She sniffed. "It's more like Guatanamo bay out there. Donna, by the way, Donna Noble, since you didn't ask." She ran her eyes scornfully over him. "I'll have a salute."

Mace threw a look at the Doctor, who nodded slightly. He snapped to attention. "Ma'am."

Donna nodded an acknowledgement. "Thank you."

The Colonel turned back to the Doctor. "And your other companion?" he asked, clearly wishing to avoid another scene.

The Doctor grinned. "Colonel Mace, meet Rose Tyler."

Rose nodded to him. "We already have," she said and then paused. Irritation flickered over her features. "But of course you won't remember." She sighed and glanced at the Doctor. "It's really inconvenient that everyone forgot after we saved the world. Proving I am who I say I am was hard
enough once, I really don't want to go through it twice."

"Welcome to my world," the Doctor replied. "I spend half my time proving my credentials." He turned back to the Colonel, all traces of mirth gone. "Now, tell me what's going on in that factory."

The middle screen flickered and a map appeared. Small red dots peppered the surface. "Fifty-two people died yesterday in identical circumstances, in eleven time zones, all across the world." He listed off an assortment of different times and countries.

The Doctor blinked. "You mean they died at the same time."

The Colonel nodded. "Exactly the same time, down to the second."

"They were poisoned," Martha put in. "I checked the autopsies. There was no trace of toxins, so whatever was used exited the body immediately. And," she continued, "they were all inside their cars."

The Doctor perked up. "What have the cars got in common?"

"Seems like nothing," Martha replied. "Completely different makes, models, and years, but they all have ATMOS, and that," she nodded at the complex behind them, "is the ATMOS factory."

"What's ATMOS?" the Doctor asked.

Donna snorted. "Don't be daft; even I know that. Everyone's got ATMOS."

"I haven't," Rose said, looking just as confused as the Doctor.

"It stands for Atmospheric Emissions System," Martha replied. "It reduces CO2 emissions to zero."

The Doctor's eyebrows shot up. "What, no carbon at all?"

"And you get Satnav thrown in and 20 quid in shopping vouchers if you introduce a friend," Donna said. "S a bargain."

"And this is where they make it, Doctor." That was Colonel Mace. "From here it ships worldwide. There are 17 factories across the globe but this is the central depot—sending ATMOS to every country on Earth."

"And you think its alien," the Doctor said as he leaned back against the desk behind him, his hands in the pockets of his trousers.

"It's our job to investigate that possibility," Mace confirmed. "If you'll follow me?"

Donna let Rose and the Doctor walk next to the Colonel. She joined Martha behind them as they walked out of the mobile base and into one of the buildings that made up the factory complex.

"How long have you travelled with the Doctor?" Martha asked.

Donna shrugged. "Around a month, I think. It's hard to tell time in that box."

Martha laughed. "It really is. I had to set my watch alarm and force him to call it quits every 24 hours so I could get some sleep."

"That's a good idea," the other woman replied. "It's all well and good for him, constantly rushing
about. Apparently he doesn't need that much sleep." She paused. "I think Rose makes him take a
break now and again." Martha nodded, thin lipped. Donna blinked. "Sorry, did I say something
wrong?"

"No, no you didn't," she replied with a rueful smile. "It's just—a bit tense, I guess. The last time I
saw them was on the Valiant, and, well, you know." Donna looked at her blankly. Martha blinked.
"You mean he didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

Martha stared straight ahead. "The last time I saw them my mother shot her. It was an accident, but
the look on his face—"

"Neither of them mentioned anything like that," Donna replied. "They said you were brilliant.
Really." She put a hand on the shorter woman's shoulder. "I don't think they hold it against you."

"Thanks, Donna," Martha said after a while. "It's just, it's weird seeing them together. He used to talk
about her all the time—Rose would know, that sort of thing. It was a shock to finally meet her. I
went and thought she was some kind of monster to leave him, and then I found out what actually
happened."

Further conversation was curtailed as they stepped into a room that was cut off from the rest of the
corridor by thick plastic sheets that hung from the ceiling. A spotlight threw harsh light over the long
table that sat in the precise center of the space. Technical diagrams covered the walls and a model of
a car sat next to a sleek silver package on the table's smooth metal surface.

"Here it is, Doctor," Colonel Mace said as he gestured to the table. "ATMOS laid bare."
Donna watched the Doctor examine the small silver package that was the ATMOS device. Martha stood at the head of the table with her arms crossed. Colonel Mace hovered close to the Doctor's shoulder and Rose leaned against the wall, her arms crossed in front of her.

"It can be threaded through any make and model of car," the Colonel supplied.

"Didn't you check it before it went on sale?" the Doctor wanted to know.

Mace was too professional to look offended. "Of course we did, but we found nothing."

"That's why I said we needed an expert," Martha asserted.

The Doctor slipped on a pair of thick rimmed spectacles as he glanced at some of the technical diagrams plastered to the wall. "Really? Who did you get?" The other four stared at him until he turned around. He blinked and took off the specs. "Right. Me. Well then, let's get to work."

The Colonel exited with Martha following behind. Donna sidled up to stand next to the Doctor and Rose pushed herself away from the wall. "Why would aliens be so keen on cleaning up our atmosphere?" the ginger woman asked.

"That's a very good question," the Doctor replied as he turned the ATMOS device over in his hands.

Donna shrugged. "Maybe they want to help—get rid of pollution and stuff. In that whole big universe you keep talking about there has to be one species that doesn't have it in for the Earth."

Rose hummed noncommittally. "Could be, but how's that old saying go?" She paused. "Oh yes. 'Beware of Greeks bearing gifts.'"

"Do you know how many cars there are on Planet Earth?" the Doctor, always with the non sequitur, asked. He continued without waiting for a reply. "Eight hundred million. If you could use ATMOS to control them you'd have eight hundred million weapons."

"It's an ionizing nano-membrane carbon dioxide converter," the Doctor declared finally.

"Which means?" Donna led.

"That ATMOS works," he responded. "Filters out the CO2 at the molecular level."

"Yes, we know all that." Impatience colored Martha's tone. "But is it alien?"

The Doctor shook his head. "The technology is from Earth, but way ahead of its time. Decades, at least." He glared at Colonel Mace, who stood next to him. "Look, d'you mind? Could you stand back a bit?"
The Colonel blinked, and glanced to Martha. "Sorry, but have I done something wrong?"

"You're carrying a gun," the Doctor snapped before she could answer. "I don't like people with guns hanging around me, all right?"

"If you insist," Mace replied, a hint of irritation slipping through his professional façade. He left the room to converse with a group of soldiers stationed outside. Martha shrugged by way of apology, and he nodded briefly.

"Techy," she noted when the Colonel was out of hearing.

"It's true," the Doctor replied.

Rose snorted. "You haven't been treating me like that," she said dryly.

The Doctor glanced at her. "You're different."

"I carry a gun," she snapped back and pulled it out of its holster at her side. Donna recognized the strangely squat weapon from the last time she saw it—at the Adipose building.

"You don't kill people," the Doctor responded, his voice harsh.

Rose held his eyes, her gaze level. "Not recently, no." Her voice was deceptively calm. "But I have before, never lightly and never easily, but I have, and I may do so again if the situation demands it."

The Doctor glared at her. "Killing isn't the answer."

She raised an eyebrow. "No? What about Toby?"

"That was the Beast." The Doctor continued probing the ATMOS device. He kept his eyes focused on the hunk of metal in front of him, but his voice rippled with the effort he was expending to control his tone and volume. "Different circumstances."

"Same outcome," she countered. Donna and Martha glanced at each other, careful to stay silent. The tension in the room was almost palpable. Donna jerked her chin at the door, and Martha nodded in wordless permission. The ginger woman disappeared into the corridor. "He's a good man. I worked with him for almost a year." The Doctor remained silent.

"It's true," Martha finally said.

He glanced at her dismissively. "People with guns are usually the enemy, in my experience."

"Yeah, 'cause they're shooting at you," Rose muttered and stalked away.

"You seem quite at home," he continued as he scanned the device with the sonic screwdriver.

"If anyone got me used to fighting, it's you," Martha replied with an edge of anger in her voice.

"So it's my fault then?" he countered.

She threw her hands up. "You got me the job! And anyway, am I carrying a gun?"

He glanced at her side. "No," he finally said grudgingly.

She crossed her arms in front of her, defensive. "It's all right for you," she said in the manner of someone airing an ongoing grievance. "You can come and go as you please—away in the TARDIS..."
and all that, but some of us have to stay behind. Some of us have to be the cleanup crew." She leaned forward. "So I've got to work from the inside. And by staying on the inside maybe I can make them better."

A small smile slipped across the Doctor's face. "That's more like Martha Jones."

Rose remained where she was, leaning against the wall again. Her posture was stiff as she stared straight ahead as if she could burn a hole in the wall with her gaze. Martha flicked her eyes in the other woman's direction, and the Doctor followed her hint. A muscle in his jaw twitched and he returned his attention to the ATMOS device. Martha rolled her eyes. Still an idiot.

"Oi, you lot!" Donna had returned. She was carrying a blue binder and grinning like the cat who ate the canary. "You should have come with me," she said as Colonel Mace returned, alerted by her shout.

The Doctor blinked. "Why, where've you been?"

She held up the binder. "Personnel. That's where the weird stuff's happening. It's all in the paperwork." The other four looked at her blankly. She rolled her eyes. "I've been a temp for years—could find my way around an office blindfolded." She paused. "Have done, actually, but—"

"Get on with it," the Doctor interrupted.

"Oi, Spaceman!" she snapped back. "I'm getting there! Anyway, first thing I noticed was an empty file."

"What's in there?" the Doctor wanted to know. "Or, not in there?"

She flipped the binder around so that the spine was facing out. "Sick days." She opened the binder. "Not a one. Hundreds of people working here, right? Not one man flu or hangover or sneaky shopping trip." She shook her head. "They don't get ill."

"That can't be right," Mace replied with a frown as he took the binder from her.

Martha grinned at her. "I can see why he likes you. You are good."

"Yeah she is," Rose agreed.

"Supertemp," Donna replied with a grin of her own.

"Doctor Jones," the Colonel cut in. "Set up a medical post. Start examining the workers. I'll get them sent through."

"Give me a hand?" Martha asked Donna. She nodded and followed the black woman. The Colonel headed in the opposite direction, the Doctor and Rose behind him. Martha glanced at the other woman, an open invitation, but Rose shook her head and jerked her chin at the two men. She rolled her eyes and the other woman grinned. Exasperated was a common emotional state when the Doctor was involved.

"Where'd ATMOS come from?" the Doctor asked as they walked briskly down the factory corridors. He was still holding the device absently in one hand.


"Rattigan, like from The Great Mouse Detective?" Rose asked, her eyes twinkling. She was still
tense, the Doctor noted. He held hand, their fingers laced together, but her arm was stiff when he tried to swing it between them.

Mace allowed himself a small smile as he shook his head. "No relation, I'm afraid. He's a child genius—invented the Fountain Six search engine when he was twelve years old. He's been a millionaire ever since." He gestured to one of the screens on the wall. An image of a rat-faced young man occupied one half, while the second half was a wall of text that scrolled from top to bottom: birth date, academic history, current residence, business ventures, criminal record (nonexistent), and various other interesting tidbits. "Now runs the Rattigan Academy, a private school that educates students he handpicks from all over the world."

The Doctor grinned. "A hothouse for geniuses? Wouldn't mind going there." He gave Rose a conspiratorial look. "I get lonely." She rolled her eyes. Mace glanced at him and then returned his eyes to the screen in front of them.

"Ignore him," Rose said. "He likes to wind people up."

Martha and Donna worked in companionable silence, with an efficiency that came with their considerable experience, not with each other, but with their respective fields. Martha was logical and organized, and Donna respected that. Organization always came naturally to her—a neat desk reflected a neat mind, she thought. Living with the Doctor was enough to drive her spare sometimes, and not just because he was an alien. She'd never seen anyone as haphazard as he was. He was so phenomenally disorganized that she was almost ready to admit that his mind worked in a completely different way, and it was all part of some vast, unknowable system that only made sense to mad Time Lords. Well, mad Time Lords and their human girlfriends. For whatever reason Rose seemed to be able to find things with an uncanny ease. She attributed it to the TARDIS, and Donna couldn't quite believe that the ship really was alive. She smiled to herself. Her granddad would love that—a sentient space-and-time ship.

She paused. "Do you think I should warn my mum about the ATMOS in her car?" she asked Martha.

"It can't hurt," the other woman agreed.

Donna nodded. "I'll give her a call."

Martha looked up from the stack of papers she was gathering. "Donna?" she called. The other woman stopped. "Do they know where you are, your family? Do they know you're with the Doctor?"

Donna blinked. "Not really," she replied hesitantly. "Although my granddad sort of waved us off." She smiled at the memory. "I didn't have time to explain."

"You just left him behind," Martha continued. Donna bristled, but the other woman's mouth twisted in a way that made her pause.

"Yeah," she said finally.

Martha nodded, the echoes of an old pain in her eyes. "I didn't tell my family," she said after a while. "I kept it all so secret." She swallowed, the pain surging through her expression, sharp and fresh. "It almost destroyed them."

"How do you mean?" Donna asked, fear coiling in her stomach. Held captive, Rose had said, used against her by a mad man. What exactly did that entail?
A muscle in Martha's jaw twitched. She took a deep breath. "They ended up imprisoned. Tortured. My mum, my dad, my sister." She looked away. "It wasn't the Doctor's fault, and I don't blame him. He saved the world, after all." She met Donna's questioning gaze. "But you have to be careful, because the Doctor has enemies. He doesn't try to make them, doesn't go gallivanting around the universe with the intention of stirring things up, but it happens. He makes things better, so much better, but there's always collateral damage." She paused. "He's wonderful and brilliant—but he's like fire. Stand too close and people get burnt." She tried for a smile and almost succeeded, and then she was gone.

Donna stood for a moment, staring at the wall. It was true. She thought about the first time she met the Doctor, about sitting on the roof of a skyscraper in south London and staring at a council housing estate.

My friend, she had this family.

Had, he'd said. Like he didn't know what it was, like he couldn't quite wrap his mind around the concept. Like he was in mourning and it didn't seem real. He knew Rose's family, knew her ex-boyfriend and her mum. It was strange, she thought. So domestic, so unlike the Doctor she knew. But then, she'd only known him for a little while, and only after.

She wouldn't call her mum and granddad. She would visit them. She would let them know what was going on, so that if something happened to her they wouldn't be left wondering where she was, like Rose's mum had been. And if something happened to them, at least they would know who to call.

The Doctor was in fine form as he argued with Colonel Mace. "You are not coming with me!" he asserted while they strode out into the sunlight. Rose had to almost run to keep up with them. That was the problem with tall men, she mused. Long legs took longer steps. "I want to talk to this Luke Rattigan," he continued, "not point a gun at him!"

"Are you leaving me behind then?" she asked pointedly. His jaw tightened, but he didn't reply.

"It's ten miles outside of London," Mace said, professional as always. "How do you plan on getting there?"

"Get me a jeep!" the Doctor replied.

Mace raised an eyebrow. "According to the records you travel by TARDIS."

The Doctor glared at him. "If there is a danger of hostile aliens I think it's best to keep the super duper Time Machine away from the front lines."

"I see." A hint of satisfaction colored the Colonel's tone. "So you do have weapons but you choose to keep them hidden."

"The most dangerous weapon I have," the Time Lord responded, "is right here." He tapped the side of his head. "And that goes with me everywhere."

Mace raised an eyebrow, but chose to let the comment slide. "Jenkins," he said instead.

A young man wearing the standard black uniform and red beret snapped to attention. "Sir!"

"You will accompany the Doctor and Miss Tyler and take orders from him," Mace instructed.

"I don't do orders," the Doctor said with the patient air of someone reiterating an old complaint.
Mace continued, unfazed. "Any sign of trouble, get Jenkins to declare a code red." The Colonel snapped a salute. "And good luck sir."

The Doctor shook his head. "I said no salutes."

"Now you're giving orders," Mace deadpanned as he walked away.

The Doctor grinned. "And you're getting a bit cheeky you are." He turned to Jenkins. "Right. Don't suppose you know the way to the Rattigan academy?"

The soldier was about to respond when Donna rushed up. "Doctor!"

He grabbed her hand with his left and Rose's with his right. "Just in time! Come on Donna, we're going to the country. Fresh air and geniuses, what more could you want?"

"Some paracetemol?" Rose quipped. "That many brilliant people in one place is gonna give me one hell of a headache." The Doctor rolled his eyes.

Donna stopped and he almost stumbled, thrown off balance by the inertia of his movements. "I'm not coming with you," she said. The Doctor stared at her, incomprehension writ large on his features. "I've been thinking," she continued, her expression serious. "I'm sorry. I'm going home."

His face morphed from confused to sad to understanding. He nodded. "Really?" he asked as if he already knew the answer.

Donna nodded. "I've got to."

"Right," he said finally. "Of course. If that's what you want." Melancholy seemed to settle over him. "I mean, it's a bit sooner than I thought it would be. There are so many places I wanted to take you—the fifteenth broken moon of the Medusa Cascade, the lightening skies of Cotter Pelluni's world, the diamond coral reefs of Kataa flo ko." He paused for a moment. "Thank you," he said finally, a sad smile flitting across his face. "You've been brilliant, Donna Noble. You saved my life in so many ways. You're—" realization seemed to wash over him like a wave. "You're going home for a visit," he continued. "That's what you mean."

She rolled her eyes and thumped him on the arm. "Yes, you great, big,outerspace dunce! Has no one ever asked to visit home, then?"

He glanced over to Rose. "Not in a long while. Bit out of practice, I am." He rubbed his ear, looking sheepish. "So, home for a visit, and then coming back."

"Ready when you are, sir," Jenkins said from behind them.

The Doctor nodded. "Right. You can come with, we'll drop you off."

The atmosphere in the jeep was tense, to say the least. Rose chatted animatedly with Donna, and even with Jenkins, whose first name turned out to be Ross, but she hardly said two words to the Doctor. The gun-thing, Donna remembered. That was when it started. But he knew she used guns. He'd defended her when Donna had questioned him back in the Adipose building. She'd never seen him use a weapon, thought he didn't need one, so of course he wouldn't be fond of people carrying them, but his distaste seemed to go beyond simple dislike. He distrusted people who carried guns—he loathed the things.

She didn't know that he'd held one himself, that he'd been so consumed with fear and fury and
revenge that he'd pointed it at someone he'd loved even then. He didn't trust people who carried guns because he did not trust himself.

"Here's fine!" Donna called as they pulled over. "I'll walk the rest of the way." She exited the car and stuck her head through the window. "Be careful, you two," she instructed Rose and the Doctor. "And save some of the fun for me!" They waved her off.

It was strange, going home. She walked down her street and memories of her childhood—of skinned knees and bicycles and first kisses and first days of school mingled with running and ash coating an ancient city and a woman turned into living stone and tiny fat babies and the memory of an alien song in her mind and a neighbor's voice pulled her from her reverie. "Haven't seen you for days!" the woman commented.

Donna smiled at her. "Been away." That didn't even cover it. She had been away—so far away. It felt like a different life, like she was a puzzle piece and she'd gotten wet, expanded, and didn't quite fit anymore. Children laughed from beside her and a car rumbled past. She stopped just outside her house. Her granddad was standing by the curb, putting the trash out for the collection the next day. He glanced over and saw her. His eyes widened. She bit her lip, a smile wreathing across her face. He held out his arms and she was hugging him in an instant.

"You're back!" he said like he could hardly believe it. "You're really back!"
Donna sat at the kitchen table, a cup of tea held between her hands. Her granddad sat across from her, his own tea untouched.

"I said so, didn't I?" he asked intensely. "I said that aliens were real!" He grinned. "I just didn't expect them in a little blue box."

Donna laughed. "I don't think anyone expects the Doctor, gramps, and it's bigger on the inside."

"Are you safe, then?" he wanted to know, suddenly serious. "Can he keep you safe?"

"He's amazing, gramps," she replied, sidestepping the question. No, she wanted to say. Not safe at all, never safe, but that's not important. She wasn't safe at home either, not really, not with what she'd seen. The difference was that with the Doctor and Rose she had a chance to change things, to help people. She knew just how big the universe was and she wanted to see all of it. "He's just—dazzling." She smirked. "Don't tell him I said that. His ego doesn't need to get any bigger."

"But is he safe?" Her granddad wasn't going to let it go.

She bit her lip. "I trust him with my life, him and Rose."

"Hold up!" he said and sat straighter. "I thought that was my job! And who's this 'Rose?' You didn't mention her last time."

"You still come first," she reassured him with a smile, "and I hadn't met her yet. They were separated for a while." She leaned forward in her chair conspiratorially. "She's his girlfriend, even though he won't say it."

"Is she an alien too?" her granddad asked with wide eyes.

Donna laughed. "Definitely not! She's from London." Although, there was something off about her, something that struck Donna as not-quite-human. It shone through when she was angry sometimes, or when she was thinking, like that telepathy bit with the Ood and the TARDIS. "She's nice, loads nicer than the Doctor. He's a bit rude," she confided. "You'll like her, gramps."

He mulled her words over for a while, and then sighed. "For god's sake, don't tell your mother," he instructed.

Her brow crinkled. "I don't know, gramps. This stuff is massive. It's sort of not fair if she doesn't know, isn't it?"

He shook his head as footsteps sounded from just beyond the door. "Doesn't know what?" Donna's mum asked as she entered with a basket of clean clothes on her hip. "And who's 'she,' the cat's mother?" Her grandfather made a face behind his daughter's back and Donna hid a smile with her hand. "And where have you been these past few days, lady, after that silly little trick with the car?"
Her voice was characteristically sharp. "I phoned Veena and she said she hadn't seen hide nor hair."

"I've just been sort of, traveling," Donna replied with a sigh.

"Oh, hark at her, Michael Palin," her mother muttered as she folded one of her father's jumpers. "Are you staying for tea, 'cause I haven't got anything in. I've been trying to keep dad on that macrobiotic diet," her grandfather made another face and Donna giggled, "but he keeps sneaking off and getting pork pies at the petrol station." Her father tried to protest but she cut him off. "Don't deny it; I've seen the wrappers in the car. Oh, I don't miss a trick."

Donna giggled again. It was comforting, seeing her family like they always had been, well, since—since her dad died. It was nice to know that some things didn't change, even when she did, even if she didn't quite fit into this life anymore.

Her mother finished folding the laundry and turned back to Donna. "Now then, what were you going to tell me? What don't I know?"

She paused, considering, really considering telling her mother, and then decided against it. "Nothing," she said. "Just, nothing."

"Good, right then," her mum continued. "You can cut those coupons. This new mortgage won't pay for itself, you know. Every little bit counts."

So Donna picked up the scissors that sat on the table, pulled the adverts out of the paper and started cutting. She wanted to laugh; the whole situation was so absurd. There were devices in cars that could turn them into weapons, and she was sitting in the kitchen cutting coupons! For some reason that moment, that little bit of domesticity, felt more alien than the TARDIS.

Miles away, Rose, the Doctor, and Ross had almost reached their destination. With Donna gone the ride was tense until the Doctor began plying Ross for information. "UNIT's been watching the Rattigan Academy for ages," the young man explained. "It's all a bit 'Hitler Youth'—exercise at dawn and classes and special diets and all that."

"Turn left," a computerized voice intoned. The Doctor frowned.

"One more question," he began. Rose snorted. As if he could ever stop at just one. Questions were like crisps to him. He looked down his nose at her. "One more question," he said again. "If UNIT thinks that ATMOS is dodgy…"

"Go straight on," the voice interrupted.

"How come we've got it in the jeeps?" the young man finished. "Tell me about it. It's fitted as standard on all government vehicles. UNIT can't get them taken out until we can prove there's something wrong with them."

"Turn right."

"Drives me around the bend," Ross said as they curved off of the main road and onto a driveway. Rose groaned.

The Doctor grinned. "Well done."

"Timed that perfectly," the young soldier replied smugly.
"Yeah, yeah you did." The Doctor was still grinning.

"I see the pundits are out in force today," Rose commented dryly. "Exactly how much of this punishment will I be forced to endure?"

The Doctor groaned. "Oh, that was horrible." She elbowed him.

"Rude," she chided. She was still angry with him, he could tell. Her eyes didn't sparkle as much as they usually did, and her smile didn't stretch quite as broad as he was used to, but she was talking to him now. And if she was joking, then she couldn't be furious. He wanted to explain that she was different, that he knew her and he trusted her to use a weapon in a way he could never trust himself, or people in general. She had killed people, yes, but she wasn't a killer. The difference was slight, but profound.

The Rattigan Academy was housed in a castle. The Doctor knew that tactic well—intimidation. Make the visitor seem small in the face of something vast and supposedly more important. Had he been anyone else it might have worked, might have thrown him off balance enough to give Luke Rattigan an advantage. However, he was the Doctor. He was a Time Lord, and he was not intimidated by buildings. Rose walked next to him, her hand in his as it almost always was. She was not intimidated either. She'd stared into the Time Vortex, faced down Daleks, and crossed the Void. What was a building to her? If anything, it reflected the ego of its owner. The man himself was waiting for them. Young men and women dressed in orange sweat suits ran past them as they walked up the gravel path.

"Is it P.E.?” the Doctor asked brightly. "Wouldn't mind a kick around. Got me daps on." As tactics went, the Doctor was using an old one, one that Rose recognized from her travels. He babbled, partially because he loved to hear himself talk, and partially because it consistently caused people to underestimate him and that made them careless.

"I suppose you're the Doctor," Luke Rattigan replied. He stood facing them, his hands clasped loosely behind his back. Confidence bordering on arrogance seemed to roll off him in waves. "Your commanding officer phoned ahead."

Rose raised an eyebrow. She knew what his response would be. "Ah," the Doctor replied. "I don't have a commanding officer."

"Your commanding officer did not indicate that there would be others," he said to the Doctor.

"Right! Let's have a look!" the Doctor declared. "I can smell genius," he confided as
they walked towards the entrance. "In a good way, of course!"

The Rattigan Academy lab looked like something out of a science fiction novel. It was impressive for a private lab, but Rose had worked for Torchwood for years and it wasn't quite up to Institute standards. She recognized some of the machinery—bits and bobs that Tosh had shown her. The other woman always seemed so enthusiastic, but Rose's main concern was the Cannon. More young men and women in orange sweat suits occupied the various stations that littered the room.

The Doctor's eyes lit up like a little boy's at Christmas. "Oh, now!" he exclaimed as he dashed off to examine bits of machines more closely. "That's clever. Look!" he instructed. Out came the brainy specs and he slipped them on as she bent closer to the shimmery fabric he indicated. "Single molecule fabric," he explained. "You could fit an entire tent in a thimble."

"Useful," she commented.

"Immensely," he agreed. "If Donna's clothes were made out of this she wouldn't have needed all those suitcases!" Something shiny caught his eye and he straightened. "Ooh! Gravity simulators!" He glanced around. "Terraforming, biospheres, nano-tech steel construction." He rocked on the balls of his feet and laughed. "This is brilliant! Did you know, that with equipment like this you could, oh, I don't know, move to another planet or something." The laughter drained out of his voice so that by the end of the sentence he was deadly serious. Luke was looking distinctly uncomfortable.

"If only that was possible," he replied with the barest of smiles.

"Were," the Doctor corrected. Luke blinked. "If only that 'were' possible. Conditional clause." He pulled the brainy specs off and tucked them in his jacket's breast pocket. The smile, small as it was, dropped away from Luke's face and was replaced by resentment.

"I think you better come with me," he said, and walked quickly out of the room.

Rose raised an eyebrow at the Doctor. "He was a bit touchy," she said casually.

The Doctor nodded. "He's hiding something." Then he grinned. "Let's find out what!"

"You're smarter than the usual UNIT grunts," Luke said as they followed him into what looked to be a huge living room. "I'll give you that."

The Doctor looked offended. "He called you a grunt!" he said to Ross, who remained professional as ever. "Don't call Ross a grunt, we like Ross."

"He's nice," Rose put in, the unspoken 'unlike some,' hung between them.

The Doctor turned on the spot, taking in the room. "Look at this place."

His constant shifting was apparently getting on Luke's nerves, as he dropped the arrogant bastard act and threw up his hands. "What exactly do you want?" he snapped.

The Doctor wandered around, looking at the paintings and objects that littered the room. One, a large metal cube with a hollowed out end—just large enough for a person to fit in standing up—took up most of one corner. The Doctor focused on it for a second, and then turned back to face their host. "I was just thinking—I do all the time, but I was thinking about something specific—ah yes, what a responsible eighteen-year-old!" He pulled the ATMOS device out of his pocket. "Inventing zero-carbon cars, saving the world." He tossed it into the air and caught it.

The Doctor hummed noncommittally. "Blinkered vision, maybe."

"What?" the young man's voice was shrill with disbelief.

"ATMOS means more people driving. That means more cars, that means more petrol—end result: the world runs out of oil faster than ever. The ATMOS system could make things worse."

Luke started forward. "You see, that's a tautology!" he exclaimed with a look of manic glee that seemed to hint at something darker. "You can't say 'ATMOS system,' because it stands for Atmospheric Omission System. So-so you're saying Atmospheric Omission System system." He smirked. "Do you see Mr. 'conditional clause.'"

The Doctor met his gaze evenly, all trace of his playful demeanor gone. He quirked one eyebrow, and then said with something like pity: "it's been a long time since anyone's said 'no' to you, hasn't it."

Luke's triumphant expression wavered for a bit and then solidified. "I'm still right, though."

"There's something to be said for being wrong," the Doctor replied calmly. "I'm wrong all the time. Get the date wrong, get the location wrong, tell someone they'll never see me again…" he glanced at Rose and smiled at her gently. "That's why I've got people like Rose, 'cause it's hard being clever. You look at the world and you connect things—random things." Intensity crept into his voice. "And you think, 'why can't anyone else just see it? The rest of the world is so slow.' And you're on your own. Because when you're really clever, and I mean really clever, then who's going to tell you 'no?' Who's going to even understand what you're talking about? So you get used to hearing 'yes.' get used to listening to that mad little voice in your head that pushes you forward until you do something brilliant and phenomenally stupid." The Doctor held up the ATMOS device. "Like this, because this might be Earth technology, but it's way out of its time. It's like finding a cell phone in the middle ages." He tossed the device to Ross, who caught it just before it hit the floor. The Doctor whirled and strode toward the strange cube in the corner. "No, I'll tell you what it's like."

"Get away from there!" Luke snapped as he entered the thing.

"It's like finding this in someone's front room!" the Doctor continued. "Very large front room, but still." He grinned at them.

"What is it?" Ross wanted to know. Rose raised an eyebrow.

"Just looks like a 'thing,' doesn't it, some sort of sculpture or what have you. People don't question 'things,'" the Doctor replied cheerily. "They just think 'oh there's a thing.' Me, I make these connections, and this," he pressed a few buttons, "looks like a teleport pod!" A flash of light lit the room and a metallic taste coated Rose's tongue and the Doctor was gone.

She frowned. "I am getting really tired of him doing that," she said to no one in particular.

Luke was pale. "Get him back!" he ordered.

She threw a scornful look in his direction. "He's the Doctor. He'll come back when he's good and ready and not a minute before."

"He does this a lot, then?" Ross asked lightly.

"You have no idea." She frowned and checked the thick leather strap that held a strange, circular
device on her left arm. "Although if he isn't back in two minutes I'm going after him."

"Two minutes?" That was Ross again.

She didn't look away from the device. "Usually takes him about three and a half to get thrown into prison." The thing beeped softly as she pressed buttons, her tongue between her teeth in concentration.

As all geniuses were, she suspected, Luke Rattigan was terminally curious. "What is that thing?" he asked as he tried to get a good look at it.

She turned away. "You wouldn't understand."

He stiffened. Didn't like to be challenged, this one. "I think I would. Genius, me," he reminded her.

Rose turned back to face him very slowly. "Oh really? I wasn't aware that you were an expert in inter-dimensional travel and temporal mechanics." She met his eyes with an intensity that he found disturbing. Suddenly her whole being seemed to shift, to become something more than the pretty toy he'd believed her to be, or perhaps he was seeing her clearly for the first time.

She was talking nonsense. "What are you on about?" he snapped.

Her mouth twitched in amusement. "I'm talking about time travel. Now, this is a bit delicate, so hush!"

He sputtered for a moment, but quieted when she glared at him.

Miles above the Earth, the Doctor faded into existence. He was on the command deck of a ship—a space ship, judging by the lovely view of planet Earth that a huge viewscreen displayed. Smaller beings bustled about, completely concealed by blue armor. Their helmets were round and squat, as if they had no necks. Suddenly the creatures froze. He was noticed, then. He pressed the quick recall button and blinked as Luke Rattigan's living room materialized before his eyes. Rose was standing just outside the teleportation pod. Ross was next to her, his gun drawn and aimed at the Doctor. He moved it aside as the skinny alien burst out and pulled both of them back. Luke Rattigan stood some distance away.

"Ross, Rose, get out!" he snapped. They ignored him. No one listened to him, why?

Another figure was fading into existence inside the teleport pod. The Doctor aimed the sonic at it and sparks flew from the controls. The figure within was only as tall as a young child, but the musculature was obviously that of an adult, and a strong one at that.

"Sontaran!" the Doctor declared. The alien—Sontaran—pointed something that looked like a thick wand at him. Rose tensed. She knew a weapon when she saw one. Her hand drifted to the gun at her waist, but the Doctor grabbed it with one of his. "That's your name, isn't it," he continued. "You're a Sontaran. How did I know that, eh? Fascinating, isn't it." He replaced the sonic in his breast pocket but kept his other hand wrapped around Rose's. "That's worth keeping me alive."

"I order you to surrender in the name of the Unified Intelligence Taskforce," Ross declared, his gun back up and aimed at the Sontaran.

"That's not gonna work," the Doctor muttered at him. "Cordolaine signal, am I right?" he called. "Copper excitation stopping the bullets," he explained for Ross and Rose's benefit.
"How do you know so much?" the squat alien demanded.

The Doctor grinned. "Genius, me," he responded and sauntered off. Rose followed him, as he still would not release her hand.

"Who is he?" the Sontaran asked Luke.

"He didn't give his name," the young man replied hastily. His eyes were wide with fear.

The Doctor leaned up against a desk casually. "This isn't typical Sontaran behavior—hiding, using teenagers, stopping bullets." He watched the alien closely, weighing his words for maximum impact. "A Sontaran should face bullets with dignity. Shame on you!"

"You dishonor me, sir!"

He leaned forward, expression intense. "Yeah? Then show yourself."

"I will look into my enemy's eyes," the Sontaran declared. The wand went under one arm as his hands traveled to the back of the helmet. With a sharp 'click' and a tug it came off.
The Sontaran's skin was leathery and brown and it appeared as if he had no neck. His eyes were black and hard and set into the front of his face—a predator, then, if the actions of his people weren't signal enough of that. Wrinkles creased his skin around his mouth, frown lines etched into his face as if with acid. He glared at the Doctor, dripping with menace.

"Oh my god," Ross said softly.

The Doctor rocked on the balls of his feet. "And your name?" he demanded, less than impressed.

"General Staal of the tenth Sontaran fleet!" the alien snapped back. "Also known as Staal the undefeated!"

The Doctor 'tsked.' "That's not a very good nickname. What if you do get defeated? Staal the not-quite-so-undefeated-anymore-but-never-mind?" Rose grinned but kept her hand near her gun. It was set to 'humanoid,' but she wasn't sure how the Sontaran was classified, or what affect her gun would have. Psychokinetic wavelength disruptors could be tricky, especially as she didn't particularly want to kill anyone unless absolutely necessary.

Ross was still staring at Staal. "Looks like a potato," he said. "A walking, talking, baked potato." His eyes were wide but he kept his gun trained on the scowling alien.

"Don't be rude, Ross," the Doctor chided. "You two look like pink weasels to him, well," he grinned at Rose, "pink and yellow." He picked up a tennis ball and racquet that were lying on the floor and fiddled with them. Rose was used to his ADD-like tendencies, but she could tell that Luke, in particular, found them confusing and rather annoying. "The Sontarans are the finest soldiers in the galaxy," he went on in the same tone he used when explaining alien cultures and habits on TARDIS trips. Whatever the Doctor believed his primary purpose, Rose always saw him as a teacher. He was almost never happier than when he was lecturing about some bit of alien culture. "They're dedicated to a life of warfare—a clone race grown in batches of millions with only one weakness."

"Sontarans have no weakness!" Staal interjected, rage making his voice even flatter than usual. Rose's hand twitched, but the Doctor remained relaxed and she took her cue from him.

"Oh hold on, it's a good weakness!" he protested.

"Aren't you supposed to be clever?" Luke asked, his eyes wide with fear instead of wonder. "Only an idiot would provoke him!"

"I have been called that a fair few times," the Doctor conceded. "But really, the Sontarans are fed by a probic vent on the back of their neck. That's their weak spot." He grinned. "They always have to face their enemies. Isn't that brilliant? They can never turn their backs."

"We stare into the face of death!" Staal asserted.
The enthusiastic interest which accompanied the Doctor's instruction faded from his face. "Yeah?" Well, stare at this." He threw the tennis ball into the air and slapped it towards the teleport. It ricocheted and hit Staal square on the back of his neck—directly over the probic vent. Staal yelled and dropped to the ground. The Doctor grabbed Rose's hand and bolted for the door, Ross hard on their heels.

"What did you do?" Luke cried, the fear naked in his voice. "What did you do!

"Greyhound forty to Trap one can you hear me? Repeat, can you hear me? Over." The Doctor held the radio and waited for a response. He was met with static. "Bollox!" He tossed it on the back seat. "Sontarans must be blocking it. How long 'till we reach the factory?"

"Ten minutes at our current speed," Ross responded, his eyes fixed on the road. He was breaking the speed limit by several kilometers but the police wouldn't stop a UNIT vehicle. Although the Doctor would never admit it, there were some perks to belonging to an organization that was affiliated with the U.N.

"If they can trace that," the Doctor said slowly, "they can isolate the ATMOS on this vehicle." Rose's eyes widened. Fifty-two deaths in the same second—could they be next?

"Turn left," the computer voice instructed.

"Try going right," the Doctor suggested.

Ross turned the wheel but the jeep continued on its path to the left. "I've got no control," he replied, eyes wide. "It's driving itself!"

"The doors are locked!" Rose cried as she jerked at the door handle. The Doctor pulled out his sonic screwdriver and buzzed it at the doors.

"It's been deadlocked!" he snapped. "I can't stop it!" Ross pulled the wires connecting the Satnav screen to the dashboard but nothing happened. "That's just a viewer," the Doctor pointed out. "The ATMOS device is wired into the car itself. You'd have to pull the whole thing out."

"I don't think we've got time for that!" Rose pointed out as she gestured to the path in front of them. They were drawing near to a river. "That journalist, the one who was investigating Luke Rattigan, she crashed into the river, right?" The Doctor nodded. "Well, I think we know why," she said. Ross frantically tried to stop the jeep, but it was to no avail. The car continued to speed towards the water. She pulled her sleeve up, uncovering the dimension cannon and frowned as she reset the coordinates. It was tricky, estimating where they were. She wasn't exactly familiar with this part of the country, not like she was with London.

"What are you doing?" Ross asked beside her. She grabbed his hand and placed it on top of the Cannon's face.

"Keep it there!" she commanded, and then grabbed the Doctor's and placed it over the soldiers. She held their hands down with her own and activated the Cannon. There was a jerk, and then the world went black.

A split-second later reality was back and Ross was on the ground, retching. The Doctor shook his head slightly, as if to clear it. She was relatively unaffected. Thirteen years of jumping had allowed her body to acclimate to the Cannon's affects, although she remembered feeling wretched the first time.
"That," the Doctor proclaimed, "is a vile way to travel. How can you stand to move through Time if it can't handle Space? Mind you, it's a sight better than Jack's Vortex Manipulator."

"What, no 'thank you, Rose, for saving my miserable life?'' she demanded from her position on the ground. "No 'I was wrong to expect that you would leave your Dimension Cannon at home and I'm ecstatic that you ignored me and managed to teleport us out of the car and thus avoiding our previously inevitable death?''

"I would have thought of something!" he protested. She glared at him, arms crossed over her chest. He rubbed his neck sheepishly. "Right. Well. Thanks."

She pushed herself up off the ground and held out a hand to help pull Ross up. "You're welcome."

"D'you think you could take us to Donna's Mum's house?" he asked tentatively.

"D'you have coordinates for that?" she shot back.

He stuffed his hands in his coat pockets. "Um, on the TARDIS."

She sighed and rubbed at her eyes. A spectacular headache was brewing. They'd fought—never pleasant, that—and now they were without transport. But, he had apologized, and in front of Luke Rattigan, boy genius. He'd admitted that he was occasionally (frequently) wrong. For the Doctor that was significant. He went on and on about his ego, proclaiming himself brilliant, taking pains to remind everyone that he was a genius. It sounded like arrogance, but Rose couldn't help but wonder if he kept extolling those virtues because he didn't really believe he possessed them.

She could stay angry and get a headache and probably make everyone around her generally miserable, or she could let her irritation go, perhaps avoid a migraine, and help the Doctor figure out what the Sontarans were up to. She knew what she was going to do. Really, it was the only thing she could do. So she took a deep breath and rolled her eyes at him. "Not much good then, are they?"

He fidgeted. "You can jump without them."

She shook her head. "Dangerous, that. Almost ended up jumping into a wall once. Not a good way to die." Her lips twitched into a half-smile. "Get ready to walk, gentlemen. We've got a companion to liberate."

One hundred and eighty-three minutes and seventeen seconds later a slightly bedraggled Time Lord stood on the front porch of an ordinary-looking house in Chiswick. Rose stood on the steps just below him as Ross searched the nearby cars for one without ATMOS. The Doctor pressed the bell and a few seconds later the door swung open.

"You would not believe the day I'm having," he told Donna with an expression of long-suffering patience on his face. The ginger woman did not look impressed.

"So, visit to the Academy go well then?" she asked as she followed Rose who followed the Doctor.

"Yeah." The other woman flashed her a grin. "With a name like 'Rattigan' he just had to be one of the bad guys." She expected an answering grin or chuckle, but Donna just looked at her blankly. Rose sighed. Donna was around ten years older than her apparent age, and had missed out on the Disney movies that made up her childhood. At least she knew that the Doctor found the coincidence amusing. "He's working with the, what was it, Sontarans—" the Doctor squeezed her hand in an expression of pride. God, but it used to take her forever to be able to pronounce some of the words he just threw out there. "to do whatever they're doing on Earth. And then they tried to kill us and I
saved all of our lives," she finished.

"And not a thank you from that one, I'll bet." Donna understood.

"And this is why I stopped traveling with multiple companions," the Doctor muttered as he let go of Rose's hand to open the hood of Donna's car. "They keep ganging up on me."

"We'll stop when you stop deserving it," Donna replied. Behind them the door to her house opened and closed. The Doctor was oblivious, locked in contemplation of the ATMOS technology, but Donna turned towards the sound. Her granddad was coming down the steps towards them.

"Is it him?" he called. "Is it the Doctor?"

Rose glanced up from her position slightly behind the Doctor and blinked. It was the old man from the newsstand, the one they'd spoken to on Christmas Eve. She tugged on the Doctor's sleeve, pulling him out of his reverie.

"What?" he asked her, frowning slightly. He hated interruptions.

"It's you!" the old man, Donna's granddad, said, wonder making his eyes wide. "It's both of you!"

The Doctor glanced over at him and then straightened, blinking. "Oh," he said slowly, "it's you."

Donna glared at both of them. "What, you mean you've met before?"

Her granddad nodded. "Oh yeah, Christmas Eve! He disappeared right in front of me, him and that girl and that other girl." He looked around. "Where is she, huh? That other pretty little blonde girl in the funny dress."

A shadow passed across the Doctor's face and Rose squeezed his hand in silent reassurance. "She's—not traveling with us anymore."

Her granddad opened his mouth to say something but Donna cut him off, apparently still stuck on the fact that the two men and Rose had met before. "And you never said?" she demanded of him.

"You never said!" he replied and turned back to the Doctor. "Wilf, sir, Wilfred Mott. Donna tells me you're one of them aliens."

"Someone's been telling tales," The Doctor replied with a look in Donna's direction. She, however, had proven to be almost impossible to frighten, even with the look. "I am, yeah, but don't go shouting it about now," he continued in a much more relaxed tone. "Nice to meet you properly, Wilf. I'm the Doctor, and this is Rose."

She smiled and shook his hand. "S nice to meet you. Donna says lots of nice things about you."

"Right, Donna!" The Doctor seemed to be remembering that she was there. "I need you to call Martha and tell her it's the Sontarans. UNIT needs to know." The ginger woman pulled out her phone and dialed as the Doctor rattled off Martha's number.

"Blimey, I can hardly remember my own," she noted.

"Genius, me," the Doctor responded smugly. "Lots going on in this great big brain."

"Not answering," Donna said after a few moments.
The Doctor stared at the cars that lined the street around them. "What are they up to?" he asked no one in particular. "Can't just be remote controlling cars—there's got to be more to it." Behind them Martha finally answered and Donna relayed the Doctor's warning. Meanwhile, the man himself poked at the ATMOS device with the sonic.

"You tried that earlier, at the factory," Rose reminded him. "Nothing happened."

"Yeah," he conceded, "but now I know it's Sontaran. Gives me a better idea of what to look for." He fiddled with the screwdriver and buzzed it again.

"Thing is, Doctor, Donna's my only grandchild," Wilf interjected. "You gotta promise me that you two will take care of her." Donna rolled her eyes as the two men ignored her existence.

"Me take care of her?" the Doctor asked, eyebrows trending towards his hairline. "She takes care of me! Well, she and Rose do."

Wilf laughed. "Oh that's Donna all over. 'The Little General,' we used to call her."

Donna smacked his arm. "That's enough tales, gramps!"

"Whoa!" The Doctor jumped back as rows of spikes shot up from the smooth surface of the ATMOS device. "It's a temporal pocket," he explained as he pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. "I knew there was something else hidden in there! It's just a second out of sync with the rest of reality. Question is," he paused to examine the spikes more closely, "what are they hiding?"

"Men and their cars." Another, feminine voice, drifted over to them. Donna's mother was coming to investigate. Rose and the Doctor were bent over the engine, with Rose concealing most of the alien from view. "Sometimes I think that if I was a car," Donna's mum began, but stopped as the Doctor straightened to greet the newcomer. "Oh, it's you, Doctor—what was it?" The venom was back in her voice.

"Yeah, that's me." He waved a hand at her and then bent back over the ATMOS device, scanning it with the sonic. Rose straightened and smiled at the new woman.

"What, you've met him as well?" Wilf asked.

"Dad!" Donna's mum exclaimed. "It's the man from the wedding! Remember, when you were laid up with Spanish Flu? And who are you then?" She turned on Rose. "When he showed up Donna disappeared, did he do that to you too? Does he wander around kidnapping women?"

"He didn't kidnap me, Mum!" Donna bit back.

"So you say!" her mother snapped.

"Look, I've been traveling with the Doctor and Rose," she explained. "I ran into them after that Adipose Industries thing happened and they offered me a place on their ship."

"They sail?" Her mother did not look impressed.

"Yeah, all over," Rose jumped in. "We were in Italy a bit ago, went to see Pompeii and everything."

Donna's mum narrowed her eyes. "I still want to know what your relationship to this, man is, Donna."

"For heaven's sake!" Donna was getting angry now. She hated when her mum was like this, so
suspicious. Granted, she'd been a bit wild when she was younger, but that was years ago. "Rose is his girlfriend, I'm just along for the ride."

A strange hissing noise came from the vicinity of the engine and a thick white smoke bellowed out from the ATMOS device. "Get back!" the Doctor snapped. "We can take care of domestics later!" He aimed the sonic at the ATMOS device again and sparks began to fly. Slowly the gas dispersed. "That should take care of it." He waved his hands around the engine, bringing in clear air and speeding the dispersal process.

"He's blown up the car!" Donna's mum screeched. "I told you there'd be trouble, and what kind of doctor blows up cars anyway!"

Donna rolled her eyes. "Not now, Mum," she said in the way people have when they're encountering a familiar annoyance.

"Oh, should I make an appointment?" the woman snarked and stormed off. Rose shot Donna a compassionate look. She'd had her share of run-ins with her own mum over the Doctor and she suspected that Martha had as well. He just had this, affect, on mothers.

"That wasn't just exhaust fumes," he said and breathed the air in again deeply. He was tasting it, smelling it, analyzing its chemical composition. Rose knew because she'd seen him do the same thing thousands of times. It was incredible just how sensitive his taste buds and nose were. He'd licked her arm once just after she'd put on lotion and proceeded to tell her exactly how many chemicals it contained. The experience had put her off lotion for a week. "Some sort of gas," he continued, "an artificial gas."

"It's aliens, then." Wilf's eyes were wide.

"But if it's poisonous," Donna began.

The Doctor nodded. "Then we're all in danger. Everyone on Earth."

"They've got poisonous gas in every car on Earth," Donna continued. She glanced around. All of the cars lining her street had the familiar ATMOS logo sticker displayed prominently on the back windshield.

"It's dangerous sitting right here," Wilf asserted as he closed the hood and moved to the driver's side. "I'm going to get it off the street." He slid into the car. The driver's door closed behind him and the locks clicked into place. The car started and thick white gas poured from its exhaust pipe.

"Don't!" the Doctor yelled.

"Granddad, get out of there!" Donna cried as she yanked on the handle.

Wilf held up the keys. They weren't in the ignition, but the engine continued to run. "It's not locked!"

The Doctor buzzed the sonic at the locks and the windows. "Nothing! It's been deadlocked!" White smoke began to swirl around the inside of the car. Wilf coughed as he struggled to open the locks. It wasn't working. The smoke became thicker and his struggles slowly became weaker. If they didn't get him out soon he would die—suffocated by the alien gas.

The Doctor grabbed his hair with both hands, his eyes wide and staring. There was nothing he could do. He couldn't get Wilf out and the sputtering roars that echoed down the Chiswick street signaled the activation of the other ATMOS devices. The whole world was going to choke and he had no idea how to stop it.
"He's going to choke!" Donna screamed as she continued to work the handle of the car. "Doctor!"

Rose was searching desperately for something heavy enough to break through the tempered glass of the car's windows. There were no handy statues lying about, and no rocks that would make any sort of impact. Her gun was out. Psychokinetic wavelength disruptors simply went through inorganic objects without affecting them, unless they were made out of certain very rare metals which would muffle the signal. She could knock Wilf out, but she couldn't break the glass. Not even smashing the gun against the window would do that. Unlike twentieth-century Earth guns, the Psychokinetic wavelength disruptor was made from light, strong alloys. It had a third of the heft that a decent size pistol did.

Meanwhile the Doctor was under the car, desperately trying to get rid of the ATMOS device. If he could destroy the central unit than the gas would stop and the Sontarans would no longer be able to control the locks. He was having very little luck.

"It won't open!" Donna yelled again, and then she looked up. Her mother stormed out of the house clutching a large ax. She stopped in front of the car and swung her weapon at the windshield. It shattered. Rose, Donna, and the Doctor stared at her for a moment. This—this was new.

"Well don't just stand there!" her mum yelled. "Get him out!" The shock diffused, Rose and Donna pulled Wilf out of the car and helped him to the door of the house.

"I can't believe you've got an ax!" Donna exclaimed.

"Burglars," her mother protested. They were standing on the front stoop now. Rose gave Wilf a kiss on the cheek and joined the Doctor by the curb. Donna hesitated. "Get in the house!" her mother ordered. "We're letting that gas stuff in!"

Rose and the Doctor said nothing but looked at her expectantly. She shook her head. "Gotta go, Mum."

"With that madman?" Her mother was not impressed. ".

"Go on Donna," Wilf ordered. "Go with the Doctor and do some good!"

"Dad!" her mum protested, but Donna was off. Ross pulled up behind the Doctor in what appeared to be a cab. "This was all I could find without ATMOS," he explained.

The Doctor nodded, and then turned back to Donna's family. "Seal up the windows and doors," he ordered. "That should help keep the gas out."

"I'll be back!" Donna promised, mouthing the words through the glass of the windows as Ross
turned the car back towards the ATMOS factory. "We'll figure this out and I'll be back," she said quietly. Wilf waved until she could no longer see him, but her mother did not.

UNIT was in uproar. Ross pulled the cab just inside the checkpoint and the Doctor bounded out. Rose and Donna followed more slowly, the smoke-choked air making their eyes water and their throats convulse in racking coughs.

"Ross, look after yourself," the Doctor directed. "Get inside the building."

The young man nodded. "Will do. Greyhound forty to Trap one, I've just returned the Doctor to the base safe and sound," he continued on his radio as he pulled further into the complex.

"The air is disgusting," Donna gasped.

The Doctor looked concerned. "It's not so bad for me," he replied. "You should get inside the TARDIS. She'll filter the air, keep it clean for you." He glanced at Rose, who had pulled a bandanna out of her pocket and was tying it around her face just under her ears. "What about you?"

She cocked an eyebrow at him. "Go to the TARDIS and miss all the fun? I'll stick with you, thanks."

He grinned at her. "The old team, then. Oh!" He reached into the breast pocket of his suit and pulled out a silver Yale key. "You'll need this to get in, Donna. You can keep that. Quite a momentous occasion, really."

Donna rolled her eyes. "We can get sentimental when the air is breathable again, Spaceman!" She grabbed the key and jogged away in the direction of the TARDIS. The Doctor held out his hand to Rose and wiggled his fingers. Her eyes crinkled at the corners and he knew that underneath her mask—which, coincidentally, made her look like an old-Western style bandit—she was smiling. She slipped her hand into his and their fingers wove together.

"Run!" she barked, and they ran.

The Doctor and Rose burst into the mobile command center. She skidded to a halt, but he continued, releasing her hand and brushing past her to where Colonel Mace stood in conference with an older man. "Right!" he barked. "Here I am! Whatever you do, Colonel Mace, do not engage the Sontarans in battle. There is nothing they like better than a war." He turned, scanning the scene in front of them. People rushed about, some narrowly avoiding collisions. Phones rang and the center screen displayed a map of the world with numbers dotting it sporadically. Percentage of gas concentration, he wouldn't wonder, and it was increasing. They needed more information! If only he knew what the gas was. The unknown element taunted him; the flavor clung to his mouth, bitter and starchy and it made him long for a banana or a jammy dodger or something to make it go away.

"For a man who doesn't give orders, you're certainly throwing them about," the older man observed with a wry smile. The Doctor blinked and a grin split his face.

"Alistair! When did you get here?" He shook the man's hand vigorously. "I thought Doris made you retire?"

Brigadier Sir Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart returned the handshake. "Oh, old generals and brigadiers don't retire, Doctor. They fade away." He glanced around. "As if retirement would mean anything in a situation like this."

"You know you miss the action," the Doctor replied, his eyes sparkling with mirth.
"Perhaps," the Brigadier allowed. "But this is Colonel Mace's command. I'm here to advise, only."

"And if that advice would perhaps be 'forward march?"' the Doctor inquired.

One of the Brigadier's eyebrows canted up sharply, but he did not answer the question. "You haven't introduced me to your companion, Doctor," he pointed out instead. Rose had pulled the bandanna down and stood next to the Doctor, her fingers twined in his own. The gesture appeared to be automatic, as the alien hadn't even acknowledged the action.

"Right!" the Doctor agreed. "Bit rude of me, that. Alistair, this is Rose Tyler. Rose, the Brigadier."

She smiled as they shook hands. "We met already, actually. You just don't remember." She turned her head and shot the Doctor a look. "Have I mentioned how inconvenient that is?"

"Ah, yes." Alistair nodded. "Doctor Jones mentioned that you appeared to have worked with UNIT closely during the year-that-never-was." He noted the Doctor's slightly possessive stance and her own calm assurance as well as the odd-looking weapon strapped to her side. "Pity that we had to forget everything. I'm sure it was an interesting partnership."

Her answering grin was wolfish. "Indeed."

"But," he continued. "Back to the situation at hand." He and Mace looked expectantly at the Doctor, who had been staring at the wall for several moments.

"Oh, that." He straightened and focused on the screens lining the opposite wall. "Leave that to me."

"And what are you going to do?" Mace demanded. He seemed to lack the Brigadier's patience, and possibly faith, in the Doctor. Or perhaps the alien's commanding presence and odd actions were finally getting to him. Alistair remembered the headaches he endured while working with the Doctor quite well. He got results, spectacular results sometimes, but his methods were unpredictable and strictly at odds with the protocols UNIT used to operate. Also, this regeneration seemed to have the bubbling energy and attention span of a five year old child.

"I've got the TARDIS," the Doctor replied. "I'm going to get on their ship."

The girl—Rose—raised an eyebrow. "We," she supplied.

The Doctor glanced at her, frowning. "What?"

"We are going to get on their ship," she replied levelly.

For a moment he looked like he was going to argue, but then apparently decided against it. "Yes. Right. We."

Alistair's eyebrows fought to climb towards his hairline, but he maintained a straight face. He'd never heard anyone speak to the Doctor like that, and he would certainly remember if he'd ever seen the alien give in without a lengthy diatribe. He studied the two of them again with renewed interest. The possibilities were endless and intriguing.

The Doctor glanced around the room again and spotted Martha standing next to a computer console, staring at the screen in front of her. He bounded over and tapped her on the shoulder. She started. "Come on," he invited with a cheery smile and then returned to Rose. Martha looked at Colonel Mace for approval. He nodded sharply and she followed the two of them out of the command center.

"Where are we off to, then?" she called.
"TARDIS!" The Doctor responded. He failed to notice the phone she palmed into her pocket. If he had, he would have realized that the TARDIS—and anyone inside it—was beyond his reach.

They raced through the factory complex to the alley where the Doctor had parked the TARDIS. Thick white smoke swirled around—nothing. The space was empty. The Doctor moved further into the grungy off-shoot in the futile hope that perhaps he had simply forgotten where he'd parked it. He knew, of course, that he hadn't, but the TARDIS remained missing. He whirled around and faced Rose and Martha, who had stopped just where the blue box had sat.

"But, where's the TARIDS?" Martha asked, her eyes wide.

The Doctor took a breath and stopped. There! A metallic tang coated his tongue and the back of his throat. "Do you taste that?" he asked Rose. She stuck her tongue out and made a face.

"Teleport," she replied.

"Exactly! Teleport exchange." His face fell. "It's the Sontarans. They've taken it." He turned on the spot, one hand going up to clench his hair. "I'm stuck—stuck on Earth like, like an ordinary person. Like a human. No offense," he held out his other hand and gestured at Martha and Rose. "But it's a bit rubbish!"

"So what are we going to do?" Martha asked insistently. The Doctor was still staring at where the TARDIS had been. Rose stepped forward and laced her fingers through his.

"We're gonna get her back, yeah?" she said quietly, her voice even and carrying a confidence that she wasn't sure was entirely real. The last time she and the Doctor had been without the TARDIS was on Krop Tor, and for all her jokes about carpets and doors, she remembered in exquisite detail the look of agonizing pain that had accompanied the idea of losing the last piece of his home. It's all I've got—literally, the only thing.

"Course we will," he replied. His eyes were far away, an expression she called his 'calculator face' because she could practically hear him thinking. "The question is how they could have found her in the first place. She was shielded—they'd never have been able to detect her." His eyes wandered on to Martha, who made a face at him.

"What?" she demanded.

His whole demeanor shifted in the way it was prone to. "I was just wondering, have you phoned your family and Tom?"

She blinked at him. "No, what for?"

An eyebrow went up slightly. "The gas. Tell them to stay inside."

She laughed, a nervous, forced sound. Rose narrowed her eyes just a bit. Martha was off, she realized, finally picked up on what the Doctor had been thinking. "The question is how they could have found her in the first place. She was shielded—they'd never have been able to detect her." His eyes wandered on to Martha, who made a face at him.

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She laughed, a nervous, forced sound. Rose narrowed her eyes just a bit. Martha was off, she realized, finally picked up on what the Doctor had been thinking. No one else from UNIT knew where the TARDIS was. It was Martha who met them there, who led them out into the open when the operation began in earnest. And her behavior was anything but typical, if the Doctor's stories were to be believed. According to him Martha had been very close to her family, had in fact left him at least in part so she could be with them and help them deal with the consequences of the Master's actions. "Of course I will," the other woman continued. "But what about Donna? Where's she?"

Rose blinked. Donna was on the TARDIS—and the TARDIS was now with the Sontarans. They weren't completely blocked off, and she had the Dimension Cannon, after all, but she decided to
"Oh, she went home," the Doctor said. "She's not like you. She's not a soldier." Martha smiled in response to the apparent compliment, and Rose was sure. Whoever the person in front of them was, she was not Martha Jones. She looked like her and sounded like her, but she wasn't. Martha would never believe that the Doctor would call her a soldier as a compliment, nor would she let the people she cared about be endangered without at least checking on them. The Doctor jerked his chin back at the command center. "So, right! Avanti!" Martha said nothing and followed their lead with a smile. Rose squeezed the Doctor's hand. They'd figure out what was wrong with Martha and get the TARDIS back. He was brilliant, after all, and she wasn't so bad herself.

"Right, change of plan!" the Doctor announced as he once-more burst through the doors of the command center. Really, would opening them properly kill him? Rose grumbled a bit under her breath but let it drop. Suggesting that now would be less than useful, as he was half-listening to her at best. Most of his attention was focused on the situation in front of him, i.e. how to avert a war without the most formidable tool in his arsenal next to, of course, his gigantic alien brain.

"Good to have you fighting alongside us, Doctor," Mace commented. The Brigadier remained silent.

"I'm not fighting," the Doctor clarified as he pressed buttons on the console in front of him. "I'm not-fighting, as in 'not hyphen fighting.'" The buttons suitably pressed, he whirled away to contemplate a sample of the strange white gas. "Have we figured out what it is yet?" he called back.

"We're working on it," Martha replied as she slid into one of the work stations.

"It's harmful," another soldier replied, a blond woman. "But it's not lethal until it reaches eighty percent density." The Doctor was beside her in a flash. She appeared startled, but continued speaking. "We're getting the first reports of deaths from the center of Tokyo city."

"And who are you?" he asked.

She stood and saluted. "Captain Marion Price, sir."

He made a face. "Oh, put down your hand." Then he bounded back to Colonel Mace, the Brigadier, and Rose. Captain Price shot a confused look at the Brigadier, who waved at her to sit back down.

"Jodrell Bank's traced the signal to a spot approximately five thousand miles above the Earth." The alien was pushing buttons again. Briefly Mace wondered if he actually had a plan or was simply incapable of standing still. "We think that's what triggered the cars. NATO has gone to Defcon one. We're organizing a strike."

"You can't do that!" the Doctor argued as he continued to push buttons and flick switches. He glanced back at the Brigadier. "Nuclear missiles won't even scratch the surface!" He pulled out the screwdriver. "Let me talk to the Sontarans."

"You're not authorized to speak on behalf of planet Earth," Mace pointed out.

"Oh, I earned that right a long time ago," the Doctor snapped back. Mace looked to Alistair, who nodded.

"Very well, then," he said stiffly and stepped back.

The Doctor planted the screwdriver firmly on the panel and put on his best 'impressive' face. "Calling the Sontaran Command ship under Jurisdiction Two of the Intergalactic Rules of Engagement. This
is the Doctor."

Inside the TARDIS, which was currently surrounded by little blue-armored men, Donna jumped at the sound of the Doctor's voice over the speakers. The display screen flickered into life and she was rewarded with the image of the Doctor and that Colonel Mace. Unfortunately, although she could see them it appeared that they could not see her. "I'm here!" she yelled at the screen anyway. "Doctor, I'm here!"

The Sontarans did not appear at all startled or worried. "Breathing your last?" one of them sneered at the screen.

"They're like trolls," Mace mused as he stared at them. The Brigadier had lost all traces of amused patience and instead regarded the aliens with careful animosity.

"Loving the diplomacy," the Doctor commented. Rose grinned. Always rude, he was. And yet he often informed others of their social transgressions.

"Pot, kettle, black, Doctor?" she muttered. He shot her a look and a quick smile before he swaggered around the control console and slouched into an empty chair.

"So tell me, General Staal," he commanded in his cockiest voice. "When did you lot become cowards?"

"Right, diplomacy," Mace said under his breath.

"How dare you!" Staal cried. "Doctor, you impugn my honor!"

The Time Lord smirked. "Really glad you didn't say 'belittle,' 'cause then I'd have a field day." Rose rolled her eyes. He couldn't resist a terrible pun, this Doctor. "Poison gas—that's the weapon of a coward, and you know it." All traces of casual mirth had faded and he stared at the aliens with all the force of the Oncoming Storm. "Staal, you could blast this planet out of the sky and yet you're sitting up above watching it die!" He tilted his head back, chin up. "Where's the fight in that? Where's the honor? Or—" he paused as an idea flourished in front of him. "Or are you lot planning something else? This isn't usual Sontaran warfare! What are you lot up to?"

"A general would be unwise to reveal his plans to the enemy," Staal responded stiffly. Clearly the Doctor's barbs about honor and pride had hit home.

The Doctor put his feet up on the console and grinned. "The war's not going so well, then. Losing, are you?"

"Such a suggestion is impossible!" Staal blustered.

"War?" Mace asked. "What war?"

"The war between the Sontarans and the Rutans," the Doctor explained, his face hard and mocking. "It's been raging far out in the stars for fifty thousand years. Fifty thousand years of bloodshed." He snorted. "Makes human wars look like schoolyard scraps. And for what?"

"For victory!" Staal asserted. He pulled out the wand and beat it into his hand. The assembled Sontarans began to chant in time with the blows. "Sontar-ha!" The Doctor rolled his eyes, pulled out the sonic screwdriver, and changed the channel to a cartoon.
"Give me a break," he muttered. Rose wound down around the workers and set a hand on his shoulder. He covered her fingers with his own and squeezed them reassuringly. She knew he was thinking of the Time War again. His face was set in lines that made him look older, weary. He always did, when he talked about the war that forced him to destroy his people. Sometimes she wondered if that was why he seemed so lighthearted—because he was consciously trying to forget just how old he really was. How much bloodshed had he seen in his very long life? How much death and destruction?

She glanced back at Colonel Mace and met the Brigadier's gaze instead. He was watching them with a look of intense assessment. She could hear the unasked question—what was her relationship with or to the Doctor? She met his look with a question of her own, a level challenge and a slightly raised eyebrow. He seemed to consider her for a moment, and then nodded briefly. She flashed him a quick smile and then turned back to the Doctor, who was aiming the sonic at the screen again.

"Finished?" he asked General Staal.

"You will not be so quick to ridicule when you see our prize!" Staal declared. The camera pulled back to reveal the TARDIS behind the assembled Sontarans. "We are the first Sontarans in history to capture a TARDIS!"

"Well," the Doctor drawled, "as prizes go, that's—Noble."

In the TARDIS, Donna started at the mention of her name. "As they say in Latin," the Doctor continued, his voice echoing in the nearly-empty console room, "Donna Nobis Pacem."

"I'm here!" she cried before she remembered that they couldn't hear her.

"But did you never wonder about its design?" the Doctor went on. "It's a phone box. It contains a phone—a telephonic device for communication. It's sort of symbolic, like if only we could communicate, you and I." She recognized that tone—it was the same one he used when he was trying to babble his way out of trouble. He was talking in code! She had a mobile!

"All you have communicated is your distress, Doctor," a Sontaran spat from off-screen.

The Doctor leaned back in the chair once more. His message was sent—hopefully Donna understood. "Big mistake showing it to me," he told Staal. "Cause I've got a remote control!"

"Cease transmission!" the Sontaran barked, and the screen went black.

Donna stood staring at the now-empty display screen. "What number to I call?" she yelled. "You haven't even got a phone!" She flung her arms out. "Oh, this is so typical Spaceman!"

"Well, that achieved nothing!" Mace snapped. He'd been incredibly patient, he thought. He had humored the Doctor even when the man was beyond insulting. He had brought him into the operation with the hope that he would solve problems, but he seemed hell bent on creating them! And he spent half an hour chatting with the enemy and antagonizing them!

"You'd be surprised," the Doctor said as he slipped past him. "Come on, Rose. Off we go!"

The Brigadier put a hand on the Colonel's shoulder. "He's not the easiest person to deal with," he muttered, "but he does get results."
"Yes sir," Mace responded, his irritation once more in check. Blimey, but the Doctor could try the patience of a saint!

Five thousand feet above the Earth four Sontaran soldiers pushed the TARDIS out of the main war room. Donna clutched at the console as the whole room shook. "What do I do?" she asked the empty room. The TARDIS hummed sympathetically, but could not answer her. She stared at the phone in her hand, a lifeline, a way out, if she could only discover how to get in touch with the Doctor.
The abandoned warehouse was far from Captain Jack Harkness's ideal base—it belonged to Torchwood One, for example, and was thus loaded with memories that he would rather forget. Torture is something that very few people would like to remember, and he had the dubious honor of refusing to remain dead, which removed most of the boundaries conventional torturers worried about. He had contemplated telling the Doctor, filling the alien in on just what had been done to him to coerce him into his current position, but he'd been more interested in answers than in revenge.

Now, though, he wasn't sure what he wanted. Torchwood Three was gone—destroyed in the blast from a bomb that someone had put inside him. They killed him, cut him open, and then stitched in a bomb and left him alone to carry it into the heart of his operation. If Gwen hadn't been using the scanner to see if she was pregnant, if he hadn't covered her hand in a gesture of comfort and congratulations—they would be dead. And unlike him, Ianto and Gwen and her tiny, barely formed child, would stay dead.

Jack Harkness had lost many people. Estelle, his brother, his parents, the Doctor (even though he was still alive), Rose (although she had come back), Owen (although he died twice), and Tosh. No more. He would not lose them, not like this. Not hunted by the people they were supposed to protect. He was used to indifference, even to scorn, but he would not stand by and let ignorant fools destroy the people he cared about for no other reason than to save face.

Where was the Doctor when he needed him? He tried calling, he tried having other people call—and received no answer. He tried calling Rose, calling Martha's phone, and calling the phone that the Doctor supposedly had on the TARDIS. Nothing. He trusted the Doctor and he knew that Rose would never deliberately ignore him, so why did it feel like he was back on the Gamestation, watching the TARDIS vanish without him?

"Jack?" Ianto's voice was loud in the silence. Gwen was still out. Trust a policewoman to know all the tricks of the criminal world.

"What's up gorgeous?" he responded, trying for levity and almost nailing it.

Ianto held a small, slim black rectangle out. "I think it's for you."

It was a portable DVD player, and the single post-it-note taped to the top was indeed addressed to 'Captain Jack Harkness.' "Where was this?" he demanded as he examined it.

"Just sitting here." Ianto gestured at the floor. "Right in the way, exactly where we'd notice it."

The thing itself told him very little. It was new, without a scratch on it, and a brand that was available in almost any electronics store. He flipped the top up. "Nothing for it, I guess," Jack muttered as he pressed the 'power' button. "Let's see what they have to say."

An image of Donna filled the screen. Jack blinked and Ianto paled. She was supposed to be safe.
She'd left a week ago with Lee—they were in Morocco on their honeymoon. His knuckles were white as he gripped the machine. If they hurt her there would be hell to pay.

And then the image began to speak. "Hello Jack, Ianto, Gwen." Donna smiled and fidgeted. "Mickey's helping me make this video."

"Cheers, mate." Mickey Smith's familiar thick London accent drifted out of the speakers.

"Anyway," Donna continued after she shot a glare at Mickey for interrupting. "We're about to leave for Morocco, me and Lee." Her face softened and sadness stole across her features. "I just wanted to say that I'm sorry, Jack. I'm so, so sorry, but we have to go now. It's already happened, for me—the 456 and the children and all of it. If I stay any longer I'll say something or do something and history will change." She looked away. "It's been so hard for me not to warn you. And I'm sorry, I really am—but the timelines and all that." She turned back to the camera. "I just want you to know, that he is coming. He's a little late, but then you know all about his driving." Jack had to smile at the exasperated affection evident in her voice. He couldn't count the number of times that the Doctor had taken them somewhere that was not where he intended. "And when he gets here," Donna went on, "you can't tell him anything about the 27 planets, not at all. It hasn't happened for them yet. But he's coming, Jack. He's coming and Rose is coming and the three of you can handle just about anything." She paused. "Oh! And don't tell me about Lee! I haven't even met him yet when I meet you for the first time." She smiled at him. "Give Gwen and Ianto a hug from me, and I'll see you all after we get back. I'm not going to lie, sand and sun sounds a bit better than dreary old England right now."

She waved, and then the screen flickered and went black. Jack closed the device and handed it back to Ianto. He turned his eyes to the roof that blocked the stars from view. He was coming. Maybe there was hope after all.
The Doctor grabbed a sheaf of papers out of Martha Jones's hands. She glared at him and folded her arms over her chest but he either didn't notice or decided to ignore her ire. "Hydrocarbons," she said after a while. "Nitrogen oxides, and about ten percent unidentified—some kind of heavy element we can't trace." He stared at the sample of the strange white gas as it swirled in a glass tube. "Have you ever seen anything like it?"

"Must be something the Sontarans invented." He frowned and the intensity in his face was frightening. "This isn't just poison. They need this gas for something else." He straightened and turned to Martha. "What could that be?"

She looked at him blankly for a moment, and then Captain Price spoke. "Launch grid online and active."

"Positions, ladies and gentlemen," Colonel Mace instructed. The Doctor's face darkened.

"What?" he exclaimed as he stormed over to where Mace was standing. "I told you not to launch!"

"The gas is at sixty percent density," Mace responded evenly. "At eighty percent people start dying, Doctor. We've got no choice."

"And what happens when the Sontarans respond?" Rose asked. She was leaning casually against the wall, arms crossed, in a manner that reminded the Doctor very much of his previous self. She even had the cocky assurance and the raised eyebrow. All she needed to complete the picture was a leather jacket. "I've seen the future, Colonel Mace, and I've seen other planets. If the Doctor says nukes won't work, it's the truth." Mace did not respond. From her station below Captain Price began the countdown. The Doctor ran a hand through his hair, eyes wide. Rose could almost see the calculations running through his head, possibilities whirling about and shifting.

"Worldwide nuclear grid now coordinating," Price noted. "Launching in fifty-four, fifty-three."

"You're making a mistake, Colonel." The Doctor's voice was flat and angry. "For once, I hope the Sontarans are ahead of you." The Doctor knew Earth's capabilities. Once, perhaps, when Torchwood still had alien weapons, they could have taken on a Sontaran battle cruiser, but now? Now there was no defense strong enough, no weapon that could destroy the alien technology. It was a war that Earth could not win, not unless they actually listened to him. Why did no one ever stop and listen? He glanced at Alistair, hoping for agreement and perhaps some support with Colonel Mace. The older man returned his gaze evenly. No help there.

"North America, online." Red dots denoting nuclear facilities appeared on the map in tandem with Captain Price's explanation. "United Kingdom, online. France, online. India, online. Pakistan, online. China, online. North Korea, online. All systems locked and coordinated." She looked back at Colonel Mace, who nodded.
The Doctor stared at the screens. Mace was decided and the Brigadier refused to intervene. This was war, then. War like the human race had never seen before.

Rose slipped her hand into the Doctor's and squeezed his fingers. He looked down at her and his eyes were haunted.

'Allow launch?' Martha Jones's phone asked. She pressed 'no.'

Everyone in the mobile command center held their collective breath—and nothing happened. The launch aborted. The screens flickered and went black. Martha Jones slid her phone back into her pocket. The Doctor blinked.

"What is it?" Mace demanded. "What happened? Did we launch?" There was no response. "Well, did we?"

"Negative, sir," Captain Price said as she brought her station back online. "The launch codes have been wiped, sir. It must be the Sontarans."

Rose followed the Doctor's gaze to Martha Jones. He moved through the crowd cautiously, with an air of casual interest that set off warning bells in Rose's head. The Doctor was never casual, especially in a situation like this one.

"Can we override it?" Mace asked behind them.

Captain Price pressed more buttons. "Trying it now, sir."

"Missiles wouldn't even dent that ship," the Doctor said from beside Martha. "So why are the Sontarans so keen to stop you?" He turned to his former companion. "Any ideas?"

She frowned at him. "How should I know?"

The radio crackled to life. "Greyhound forty declaring absolute emergency!" Ross's voice crackled over the speaker. "Sontarans in the factory, east corridor, grid six." The Doctor's eyes widened.

"Declaring code red," Mace ordered. "All troops, code red!"

"Get them out of there," the Doctor growled.

Mace set his jaw. "All troops, open fire."

In the east corridor Ross and his men brought their weapons to bear on the enemy, and like the nuclear strike, nothing happened. The guns replied with empty 'clicks' when the soldiers pulled the trigger and the Sontarans advanced. Dismayed, they hit the guns, shook them, desperately tried to fix them. Nothing worked. The Sontarans advanced.

"The guns aren't working," Ross said over the radio. "Inform all troops—standard weapons do not
work." One of the Sontarans, the only one without a helmet on, opened fire. A pulse of red energy shot forward. Four soldiers fell, screaming. "Tell the Doctor it's that Cordelaine signal," Ross continued. His voice was even as his heart pounded. He was going to die. His men were already dead, and although he'd avoided the first wave of shots he knew it was only a matter of the Sontaran readjusting his aim. "He's the only one who can stop them." The Sontaran turned and fired. The radio slipped from Ross's lifeless hands.

Static blared from the speakers. The Doctor stared at Mace, his eyes wide. A muscle in his jaw twitched. Mace closed his eyes. "Greyhound forty, report. Over." There was no reply. "Greyhound forty, report." Again, only static. "Greyhound forty, report."

"His name wasn't 'Greyhound forty,'" Rose broke in. She couldn't stand it any longer. She knew war and carnage; she'd seen them over and over again in her travels with and without the Doctor, but it hit her every time, the needless death. She liked Ross. He was funny, even if he favored bad puns, and he was brave and he was pretty clever and he was young. They were all young, and for not the first time and not the last she felt old. "His name was Ross," she said bitterly. They could at least have the decency to call him by his proper name after they killed him.

"Now," the Doctor said—his voice low but with all the power of the Oncoming Storm behind it. "Listen to me and get them out of there."

Mace took a deep breath. "All troops, retreat. Order imperative—immediate retreat!"

Outside chaos reigned. UNIT troops were essentially helpless—their weapons were rendered useless by the Cordelaine signal and their smart black uniforms in no way shielded them from the searing energy pulses the Sontarans fired. The sound of screams filled the smoke-choked air. The Sontarans strode through the factory, picking off soldiers leisurely. Laughter, harsh and mocking, mingled with the sizzle of laser blasts and echoed off the metal walls of the factory.

"This isn't war!" the sole unmasked alien declared as another soldier fell to the ground with a strangled cry. "This is sport!" The corrugated steel doors descended, sealing the Sontarans inside the ATMOS complex.

"They've taken the factory," Colonel Mace said. The mobile command center was not quite as chaotic as the scene outside, but it was close. Officers worked frantically to coordinate the retreat and to discover what was wrong with the nuclear system.

"But why?" the Doctor asked as he paced. "What do they need it for? What are they up to?"

"Are they trying to breach the perimeter, to move beyond the confines of the factory itself?" They turned to look at the Brigadier, who had been silent for so long that most of them had forgotten he was present.

"Launch grid back online," Captain Price noted. No sooner had she spoken than the screens once again flickered and went black. "They're inside the system, sir," she said with a frown. "It's the only possible explanation. It's coming from within UNIT itself."

"Trace it!" Mace responded. "Find out where it's coming from, and quickly."

"That is a brilliant question, Alistair." The Doctor grinned at his old friend. "Well, have they broken through the factory doors yet? They're only steel, after all. A continuous blast from Sontaran weapons should cut right through them."
"No, sir," another officer replied. "No reports of Sontaran incursions outside of the factory proper."

The Doctor rocked on the balls of his feet, his hands clasped behind his back. "Now why would they do that?" he asked. Rose rolled her eyes and elbowed him. He yelped. "What was that for?"

"I know that face," she replied with a smile. "You've got an idea. Why don't you share with the class?"

"Stealing my thunder, you are, Rose Tyler," he said with a bit of a pout. She ignored him and instead raised her eyebrows in expectation.

"They started defending the factory only after we were inside," Mace added. "I would like to know why, Doctor."

"All right, all right," he grumbled. "No sense of style, either of you." He leaned back. "They waited until now to reveal their presence because they wanted UNIT here." His gaze flickered to Martha and then back to Alistair and Colonel Mace. "You gave them something they needed, something now hidden inside the factory—something precious."

Colonel Mace straightened. "Then we've got to retrieve it."

The Brigadier, however, had moved on. "This Cordelaine signal," he mused. "What is it? How does it work?"

The Doctor shrugged. "Basic copper excitation. It affects the bullets, causing the copper shell to expand and making the gun unusable."

The Brigadier glanced to Colonel Mace, who nodded his head sharply. "Understood," he said with a quick salute. "I'm on it."

"For the billionth time," the Doctor exclaimed, "you can't fight Sontarans!"

"Not on a global scale, perhaps," Alistair allowed, "but we need to get into that factory and recover whatever it is the Sontarans are protecting. Without functioning weapons our chances of success are nil."

"Even if you can get the guns to work, Alistair, the Sontarans have lasers!" The Doctor snapped. "Everyone you send inside will die!"

"I don't hear you offering any ideas, Doctor," the Brigadier responded crisply. "And I think you're underestimating our soldiers."

The Doctor threw up his hands. "Fine, send people off to die! Don't listen to me, what do I know?"

Rose put a hand on his arm. "Doctor, this is their planet. Let them defend it." Her voice was firm, but not angry. "Just because they don't do it the way you would doesn't make them wrong." She tilted her head. "You were the one who reminded me that different doesn't always mean bad-different."

He sighed as the Brigadier left to oversee the preparations. "They're going to get people killed."

"Probably," she agreed. "But what good are we if we can't get inside?"

He seemed to think about that for a moment and then held out his hand. "Do you have your phone?"

She blinked at him. "Yeah."
"Give it to me." Rose pulled her mobile out of her pocket and handed it to the Doctor. He flipped it open and dialed.

Something was ringing, Donna realized. Something on the console was ringing! She sprang from the captain's chair and followed the noise. There was a phone plugged into the whatchacallit! A bloody phone! She grabbed the receiver with shaking fingers and clutched it to her ear. "Hello?"

"Donna, it's me," the Doctor said in her ear.

"What's happened?" she demanded. "Where are you? And how come you never told me you have a phone?"

"I travel around the universe in a dimensionally transcendent, sentient, space and time ship that looks like a phone box!" he protested. "Of course it has a phone. And I'm still on Earth, but don't worry. I've got my secret weapon."

"What, Rose and her Dimension thingy?"

"Ah, no. The Sontarans have this field around their ships, prevents that sort of teleport or I'd be up there myself." There was a bit of a pause, just enough to make Donna nervous. "It's you."

"What!" she objected. "Somehow that's not making me feel any better!" An idea struck her. "Can't you just zap the TARDIS down to Earth with that remote control?"

"Yeah, about that." If he said what she thought he was going to say then she was going to give him a slap to remember if she got back. When. When she got back. "I don't have a remote. Need to get one, though. Remind me when we sort this out to stop by that Asteroid we visited last week and pick up the parts. Besides, I need you on that ship. That's why I made them move the TARDIS." She could hear him take a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Donna, but you've got to go outside."

She turned pale. "But—there's sonteruns out there."

"It's Sontarans," the Doctor replied, stressing the 'ah' sound, "but they'll be manning the battle stations now. They don't exactly walk around having coffee." Rose frowned at him and he took another breath, trying to keep his voice patient and not betray the tension he felt. What he was asking was very dangerous, but also highly necessary. He had a plan, of course he did, but he couldn't execute it if Donna and the TARDIS were still on board the Sontarans' ship. "I can talk you through it," he promised.

Donna realized that she was shaking. She'd been in dangerous situations with the Doctor before, but always in the heat of the moment. "What if they find me?" she asked and bit her lip.

The Doctor closed his eyes. She was so strong, Donna, and right now he knew that she was afraid. He could hear the tremble in her voice even as she tried to hide it. Rose grabbed his free hand and laced her fingers through his. "I know. I wouldn't ask, Donna, but there's no one else—there's nothing else I can do. The whole world's choking."

She took a deep breath. "What do you need me to do?"

"Give me your mobile phone number," he replied. "You'll need to move about and the phone in the
TARDIS isn't cordless." She did so, and then waited for him to call back. The waiting was the worst, she thought. It gave her too much time to think. She hadn't even called her mum or granddad to check up on them. If she died now the last thing they'd remember was her driving away in the car, essentially abandoning them in favor of the Doctor. Her mobile rang and she answered. "Right. The Sontarans are in the factory, which means they've got a teleport link with the ship, but they've deadlocked it. I need you to reopen the link."

"I can't even mend a fuse!" she cried.

"Donna, stop talking about yourself like that." His voice was stern and commanding. She felt a little bit of her trepidation fade away in the face of his certainty. "You can do this. You're brilliant."

"Right," she said. "I am." A little bit of her usual attitude slipped into her tone. She took the phone away from her ear and slowly opened the TARDIS door. A Sontaran was standing outside. She yanked her head back in and shut the door as quietly as she could. "There's a Sontaran," she told the Doctor quietly.

"Did he see you?"

She shook her head and then remembered that he couldn't actually see her. "No, he's got his back to me."

"On the back of his neck there's a plug," the Doctor said. "It's called a probic vent, and it's a Sontaran's only weakness. I need you to hit it. If you do it should knock him out for a while, long enough for you to find the teleport link and open it up."

"But he's gonna kill me." The waver was back in her voice. The Doctor pulled his hand out of Rose's and ran it through his hair. Rose didn't object. She could see the guilt and pain that Donna's anguish was causing him. If only she'd gone back to the TARDIS—he'd done this sort of thing before. Donna was magnificent, but Rose knew from experience how terrifying what she was about to do could be.

"I'm sorry, I swear I'm so sorry," the Doctor continued, "but you've got to try. If you can't get that teleport link open I have no idea how I'm going to stop this from escalating into an interstellar war, and one that humanity has no chance of winning."

There was silence for a long moment, and then Rose could hear a shaky "Okay," over the phone's speaker. The Doctor closed his eyes and she recaptured his hand. He stood there, eyes closed, phone held against his ear, as if he was straining to listen for any hint of a sound. Footsteps, he heard footsteps, and then the movement of air that heralded the opening of the TARDIS door. And then he heard a crash.

"Donna, what happened?" he whispered furiously. "Donna?"

"Back of the neck," she replied with some of her usual spark.

He grinned. "Oh, you are magnificent! Now, you've got to find the external junction feed to the teleport."

"The what? What's it look like. Earth girl, remember, spaceman?"

"It's a circular panel on the wall with a big symbol on the front—like a letter 'T' with a horizontal line through it or two 'F's placed back to back." The intensity was back in his voice and the sparkle in his eyes. Oh, she was good, Donna. He'd always known it but it was gratifying to have proof presented,
all the same.

"There's a door."

"Should be a switch by the side," he replied.

"Yeah, there is, but it's for a Sontaran. You've got to have three fingers!"

He resisted the urge to scold her for pointing out the obvious. She was in a stressful situation and she was doing marvelously well. Besides, Rose might hit him if he was sharp. He glanced at her. Yep, definitely in hitting range. Instead, he went with patient. "Donna, you have three fingers."

"Right! Yeah, of course." She sounded embarrassed. There was silence for a moment. "I'm through."

He grinned again. "Have I told you you're brilliant, Donna Noble?"

"That's enough sweet talk out of you, Martian boy," she responded sternly. "You're taking me an' Rose shopping after this is sorted, you hear?" He rolled his eyes but didn't contradict her. "Right. 'T with a line through it."

The Doctor glanced up as Colonel Mace strode back into the command center. "I've got to go. Keep the line open!" He snapped the phone closed.

"Positions!" Mace said crisply. "That means everyone." He tossed the Doctor and Rose each a gas mask.

"Better than a bandanna," she commented and followed them out.

"You're not going without me!" Martha called as she brought up the rear.

The Doctor grinned. "Wouldn't dream of it."
Colonel Mace held a gun out to the Doctor. They were standing outside the ATMOS factory. Thick white gas swirled around them. It was quiet—eerily so, considering what was waiting for them inside the factory. "Latest firing stock," Mace said as he offered it up for the Doctor's inspection. "What do you think?"

"Are you my mummy?" the Doctor replied, making no move to touch the weapon. Rose snorted. Oh, he would bring Jack up now. One more time when a human almost destroyed the world by accident, as she was sure he believed Mace was on the brink of doing, and there were even gas masks. No one else seemed to get the joke, but then the only other person who knew about Jack's origins was on the enemy's spaceship miles above Earth.

The Colonel was not amused, nor was he deterred. For some reason Brigadiers Bambera and Lethbridge-Stewart trusted this man. It would be remiss of him to question their judgment. "If you could concentrate," he said severely, and held up the ammunition. "Bullets with a rad steel coating. No copper surfaces—should be able to overcome the Cordelaine signal."

"But the Sontarans have lasers!" The Doctor protested.

Rose held out her hands. "May I?" she asked Mace. He nodded and passed her one of the weapons. She examined it briefly and passed it back. "Very nice." He nodded. At least someone appreciated their efforts. His estimation of the Doctor's companion shifted a bit. He'd caught the appraising looks she and the Brigadier had traded. It was like watching two wolves circling. She wasn't a civilian, not like the other woman—Donna—but she wasn't a soldier, either. Whatever she was, it was nice to have someone on his side, for once.

"You can't even see in this fog!" the Doctor went on. "The night vision doesn't work."

"Thank you, Doctor," Mace replied. He was calm, but firm. "Thank you, for your lack of faith, but this time I'm not listening."

Rose crossed her arms over her chest and looked at the Doctor. If he could see her eyes he thought she'd be glaring at him. "What?" he asked her. "It's true."

"You," she said, emphasizing her irritation with a poke to his chest. "Are being rude again." She turned to Colonel Mace. "Sorry about him. Sometimes it's hard for him to remember that people besides him can be clever." The Doctor chose not to respond to her accusation, although the set of his shoulders betrayed his irritation with the whole situation. Mace wisely chose to let her comments drop. Instead he ripped the gas mask off and turned to face the rest of his troops.

"Attention!" he snapped. "The Sontarans might think of us as primitive, as does every passing species with an ax to grind. They make a mockery of our weapons, our soldiers, our ideals—but no more. From this point on it stops. From this point on the people of Earth fight back, and we show them. We show the warriors of Sontar what the human race can do." He shifted his face so that he
was speaking into the microphone at his neck. "Trap one to Hawk major—go, go, go!"

A growling roar of engines filled the air. Soldiers dropped, shielding their faces with their arms. Martha started, but Rose recognized the sound. She and the Doctor and Colonel Mace remained standing, relaxed, as a huge dark object became visible above them. Wind seemed to come from everywhere, buffeting and blowing the gas away, forcing a clear area around the factory. "It's working!" Mace declared, smiling. "The area's clearing!" He addressed the microphone again. "Engines to maximum!" The roar became louder and the wind stronger. After a few moments Rose took off her mask. It was no longer needed. The Doctor removed his and whooped. "It's the Valiant! Oh, that's brilliant!"

"UNIT carrier ship Valiant reporting for duty, Doctor," Mace agreed. "Its engines are strong enough to clear away the fog." All around them soldiers were divesting themselves of the black gas masks. It felt good to breathe clean air again, Rose noted, although there was still a faint taste of whatever the gas was made of in the back of her throat. The Doctor ran a hand through his hair, beaming at the ship that hovered above the factory. "Getting a taste for it, Doctor?" Mace inquired mildly.

The Doctor's smile disappeared. "No, not at all. Not me." He turned away to face Rose, who was waiting for him, one eyebrow cocked. She didn't believe him, not one bit, but he was too stubborn to allow that maybe Mace had been right, and he was wrong. Nor could he admit that perhaps he too had underestimated the people of Earth, and UNIT in particular.

The Colonel turned his attention back to the Valiant. "Fire at will," he instructed. Above them the engine's roar took on a deeper tone and four beams of green light shot out, connected in the center to form a blinding pillar, and impacted against the factory's roof. The Doctor swore softly. It was the same kind of weapon that Harriet Jones had instructed Torchwood to use when they destroyed the Sycorax ship. Humanity wasn't supposed to have that technology for decades yet! He trusted Alistair, really he did, but the man wasn't going to be around forever, and he wasn't in charge of UNIT anymore, not formally.

Rose elbowed him in the ribs and he protested. "What was that for?"

"I know that face," she replied. "Stop thinking, and let's get inside, yeah? S what we came here for."

"Right," he said, rubbing his side in mock pain. She rolled her eyes. "Coming, Martha?"

"East and North secure, Doctor!" Mace barked as they charged through a door.

The Doctor had Rose's phone pressed against his ear. "Donna, hold on. I'm coming." Then it was closed and back in his pocket. He whipped out the sonic screwdriver and flashed it at the various corridors leading away from their position. Mace and the rest of the soldiers were heading towards the sound of laser fire. Martha caught up with them, panting slightly.

"Shouldn't we follow the Colonel?" she asked.

The Doctor shook his head. "Nah, he's got his end covered. You and me and Rose, Martha Jones." He smiled. "Just like old times."

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Scanning for alien technology," he replied, "oh, and it looks like it's this way!" He turned down one of the corridors.

"Finally some Spock!" Rose said with a smile. The Doctor rolled his eyes, and Martha looked
"Rose Tyler," he said over his shoulder, "is the TARDIS not enough flash for you? I take you to the end of the world, to the year five billion, to meet Queen Victoria and Woman Wept and you're looking for something shiny?" He shook his head. "I offer you all of time and space and you go after Captain Jack because he does a scan!"

"A girl's got needs, Doctor," she shot back and flashed him a tongue-touched smile.

The sonic led them away from the pitched battle that was being fought within the confines of the factory. They went through corridors and down stairs and around corners so many times that Rose wasn't sure she'd be able to find her way out again. The factory, like most industrial buildings, was built like a maze. She'd always wondered about that—did the architects plan it on purpose, to confuse potential intruders, or were they just having a laugh at future visitors' expense? The Doctor never wavered. He kept scanning, his eyes on the sonic. When the pitch shifted he turned right or left. He didn't even seem to be paying attention to her and the thing-that-wasn't-Martha.

He thrust open a door and they found themselves in a dark corridor. The lights flickered on as they entered—motion sensors, she noted. It was empty and silent. "No Sontarans down here," he commented. "They can't resist a battle." He flashed the sonic around and grinned. "Here we go." He took long strides down the hallway and stopped in front of a set of double doors. Rose followed him, and the-thing-that-wasn't-Martha brought up the rear. Rose disliked the arrangement. She felt exposed and the spot between her shoulder blades itched, but she couldn't think of a way to drop behind the woman without alerting her that the game was up. The Doctor didn't seem concerned, and she decided to take her cues from him. After all, it worked before.

He stopped in front of the doors and shut off the scan. "Now for a bit of jiggery-pokery!" It took all of two seconds to get the doors open. The sonic was quite good with keypads, and while UNIT's technology might have given him some problems, the factory was definitely sub-par in the security department. A faint greenish light shone from the doorway. He raised his eyebrows at his companions and jerked his head towards the door. "Come on then."

It was some kind of mechanical room—probably something to do with the heating and air conditioning. Huge vats lined the walls and machinery chugged away, unaware that there was a war going on above. The strange light came from a machine that sat almost in the center of the space. It looked a bit like a pod crossed with an examination table, and lying on it was the unconscious body of Martha Jones. The Doctor sprinted towards her and Rose followed close behind.

"Oh, Martha," he said quietly. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

"Is she dead?" Rose gasped beside him.

He shook his head. "No, they needed her alive." His hands moved to the controls and a sharp 'click' echoed throughout the chamber. Rose turned and found the-thing-that-wasn't-Martha aiming a gun at the Doctor.

"Yīgè jīnǚ de érzi!* she muttered and her hand went for her own weapon.

"Don't try it," not-Martha snapped. "I will shoot him."

The Doctor glanced back at her. "Am I supposed to be impressed?" he asked flatly. "And really, Rose. Where did you learn language like that? It wasn't with me. I'd remember."

"I was stuck on the rim for three years in the 26th century," she replied. "Amazing what you pick up
"When you have to." Her tone was light but her eyes never left Martha and the gun. The last thing she wanted to deal with was a regenerating Doctor. They need him with his wits together, not scattered about or unconscious.

"Wish you carried a gun now?" not-Martha inquired sarcastically. "I know you're little girlfriend's got one, but she won't risk you."

The Doctor shrugged and returned his attention to the machine that held the real Martha Jones captive. "Don't see the point of guns, myself. There are much more dangerous weapons out there."

"I've been stopping the nuclear launch," the other woman declared smugly. "All this time they're rushing about trying to figure out who it is, and I was right there in the room!"

The Doctor straightened and not-Martha adjusted her aim so that her gun was still pointed squarely through his skull. She'd destroy his brain and there's be no regeneration from that. "Yes, well done. You were doing exactly what I wanted." She blinked. She hadn't expected him to congratulate her. "I needed to stop the missiles just as much as the Sontarans. I'm not having Earth starting an interstellar war." He grinned at her. "You were a triple agent, and you didn't even know it."

"When did you know?" she asked, frowning.

"About you?" He snorted derisively. "Right from the start. Reduced iris contraction, slight thinning of the hair follicles on the left temple, and frankly," he screwed up his face in an expression of disgust, "you smell."

"Also, Martha Jones cares about her family," Rose said. She had her gun out and aimed at the clone. The thing had been so absorbed by its apparent victory that it had ignored her in favor of gloating over the Doctor. It was a mistake that several people and aliens had made before. Most of them never did again. "She would have called them straight away and warned them about the gas."

"You might as well have worn a t-shirt that said 'clone,'" the Doctor continued as he wandered around the strange machine. "Although, perhaps not around Captain Jack." He stared at not-Martha intensely. "You remember him, don't you, because you've got all her memories. That's what the Sontarans needed, that's why they had to protect her, to keep you inside UNIT." His expression turned from mildly amused to deadly serious. "Martha Jones is keeping you alive," he growled, and pulled a thick cord from the machine. The clone gasped and clutched at her chest, and then crumpled to the ground. Martha, the real Martha, jerked and shot straight up.

"Doctor!" she cried.

"I'm here," he replied, and smiled at her. "Welcome back." He looked like he was about to say more when the chorus of Billy Joel's "You May Be Right" issued from the pocket of his overcoat. "Oh, that's for me. Blimey, I'm busy!" He fumbled in his pocket.

*You may be right, I may be crazy, the phone continued to play, but it just may be a lunatic you're looking for.* He finally managed to get it out and open. "Hello, Donna? You got it?"

Rose kicked the clone's gun away from her and helped undo the straps that held Martha to the machine. "There was this alien," she babbled, "this thing!"

"We know," Rose said. "The Doctor figured it out." She offered the other woman a reassuring smile.

"Yes," the ginger woman snapped. She was standing in front of what the Doctor had called the teleport link. Donna Noble was a formidable woman, and right now she was decidedly not-happy.
She had just finished hiding from a detachment of Sontarans and she would really, really like to get her job over with so she could go back to the TARDIS and get back to Earth! "Now hurry up!"

"Take off the covering," the Doctor instructed her over the phone. "There should be a bunch of blue switches inside. Flip them all up, like a fuse box. That should get the teleport working."

The straps open, Rose stepped back to allow Martha to get out of the strange pod-thing. She offered her hand and pulled the other woman to her feet. Martha glanced around the room and turned pale. The clone was lying on the floor, gasping. "Oh my god," Martha whispered. "That's me."

"That's a clone," Rose replied softly. "The Sontarans were using her as a spy to get inside UNIT."

The Doctor shut the phone with a snap and bolted to the Sontaran's teleport pod. He ripped the bottom plate off of the control panel and yanked out a handful of wires. He was reworking it, aiming the sonic inside every few seconds. Martha took a hesitant step towards her clone. When the thing didn't lash out she knelt beside it. She reached out her hand, but the clone pulled away.

"Don't touch me!" it hissed.

"It's not my fault," Martha protested. "The Sontarans created you, but you had all my memories."

"You've got a—brother," the clone said after a while. "And a sister. A mother—and a father."

Martha nodded. "And if you don't help me, they're all going to die."

Rose remained standing, but she slipped her gun back into the holster. The clone wasn't a threat any more, and she had to admit that she felt a pang of sympathy for the creature. It didn't ask to be created, and it was just doing its job. Did it really deserve death as a result?

"You love them," not-Martha said after a while.

"Yes," Martha responded emphatically. "Remember that?"

"The gas!" the Doctor snapped as he pushed himself away from the pod and towards Martha and Rose. "Tell us about the gas!"

The clone was on the defensive immediately. "He's the enemy!"

"Then tell me," Martha replied. Rose waved at the Doctor, motioned for him to stay back. He would only upset the clone, and she didn't think that the creature had much time left. She was leaning against a pole for support and her face was pale beneath her chocolate colored skin. "It's not just poison, but what's it for?" The clone remained silent. "Martha, please!"

Not-Martha drew in a deep breath. "Caesofine concentrate," she said haltingly. "One part Bosteen, two parts Probic five."

"Of course!" the Doctor yelled and smacked his forehead. "It's clonefeed!"

"What?" Rose asked, frowning.

"What's clonefeed?" Martha turned away from her clone to stare at him.

"It's like amniotic fluid for clones," the Doctor explained, "and the Sontarans are a clone race. They're converting the atmosphere, changing Earth into a clone world. That's why they needed to stop the missiles! Caesofine gas is volatile!" He rushed away back to the teleport pod.
Clone Martha turned her attention back to her counterpart. "My heart is getting slower," she whispered.

Martha Jones looked stricken. "I'm sorry," she replied. "There's nothing I can do."

"In your mind you've got so many plans." There was a look of wonder on the clone's face. "So many things you want to do."

"And I will." Martha's voice was shaking. "Cause my mum, she says 'never do tomorrow what you can do today, cause.'"

"'Cause you never know how long you've got," the clone finished. "Martha Jones—you've got so much life." And then her eyes closed and she slumped to the ground. Martha took the creature's hand hesitantly, and removed her wedding ring. She slid it back into its place on her ring finger and looked up at Rose, who had taken the sheet the Sontarans covered Martha with off of the machine. She knelt beside the clone and straightened her out so that she was lying on her back, her arms at her sides. Then Rose stood, and draped the sheet over her. She reached out her hand, and helped Martha up.

"She was just doing what she was told," Martha said quietly as she stared at the covered body.

"I know," Rose replied.

"I wonder what she would have been like if there wasn't a war going on," Martha mused. Rose remained silent and joined the Doctor at the teleport pod.

On the Sontaran's ship, Donna finished with the teleport link. She grabbed her phone and pressed the speed dial. "Blue switches done," she said when the Doctor picked up. Heavy footsteps echoed behind her and she whirled. Two Sontaran soldiers stood a few feet away, their weapons at the ready. "They've found me!" she cried.

The Doctor stepped out of the teleport pod and aimed his sonic. "Now!" he shouted, and the machine whirred to life. Light flashed, and Donna was standing next to him.

"Have I ever told you how much I hate you?" she shrieked and hugged him.

"Now, now, off!" he gave her a quick hug and then pushed her away. "Gotta bring the TARDIS down!" He fiddled with the controls and the pod hummed again. He turned to Rose and grinned. "There we are, she's back where she belongs." He grabbed Rose's hand and pulled her into the pod. "Coming, Martha?" he called. Donna scooted inside as Martha joined them.

"What about this nuclear launch thing?" she asked, holding up her phone.

"Just hit 'no' every time it pops up," the Doctor replied. "Allons-y!"

"We're not going back on that ship!" Donna cried.

The Doctor shook his head. "No, no. Just needed to get the teleport working so that we could get to the Rattigan Academy." He'd been pressing buttons while I spoke, and before they could blink the scene outside the pod changed to Luke Rattigan's front room.

The man himself was waiting for them, gun aimed once again at the Doctor. "Don't tell anyone what I did!" he yelled. "It wasn't my fault!" Rose was closest. She took a step towards Luke and elbowed him sharply in the ribs. He doubled up and she snapped her arm downwards, grabbed the gun and
wrenched it out of his hands.

"I am really tired," she said conversationally, "of having guns pointed at me today, aren't you, Doctor?" Luke stared at her as she breezed past him and the Doctor followed. Donna stared at Rose for a moment, and then she and Martha brought up the rear. Luke watched them go, all of the arrogance drained away. He felt like a child again, a small, weak, petulant child.

The Doctor rushed about the lab at the Rattigan academy. He was pulling bits and bobs of machinery from various tables and drawers and assembling something. What it was, Rose couldn't be sure. She was a fair hand with alien tech now, but this was all human. Futuristic, apparently, but still human and still beyond her. Luckily the Doctor was rambling on as he worked. "So they couldn't have UNIT launching nuclear missiles, because Caesofine gas is volatile, and they need the atmosphere intact!" Luke had joined them and he stood off to the side, watching. "But all the time we had Luke here in his little dream factory." He shot the boy a contemptuous look. "Planning a little trip?"

"They promised me a new world," he said softly.

"And you were building equipment, ready to terraform 'El Mondo Luko' so that you could live there and breathe the air—with this!" He flicked a switch and lights flashed on the device. "An atmospheric converter!" He looped cable around his neck, grabbed the device, and sprinted toward the doors.

The scene outside of the Rattigan Academy was bleak. White smog hid the surrounding countryside and the sun from view. Donna gasped. "That's London," she choked. "You can't even see it! My mum and granddad are out there!"

The Doctor fiddled with the converter. "If I can get this on the right setting…"

"Hold on, Doctor," Martha interrupted. "If you fire that thing, won't the atmosphere ignite?"

His adjustment finished, he straightened, grabbed the control, and stepped back from the machine. "Yep," he replied, popping the 'p.' "That's the idea." Then he flicked a switch and a burst of fire shot from the tip of the device. It went higher and higher until it was lost from view. They stared after it, straining for a glimpse, a hint that it succeeded. The white fog swirled, and then burst into flame. All across the sky, from horizon to horizon, a curtain of fire blossomed. It rolled overhead, and then it was gone and the gas with it and the sun shone down on the planet below. Donna whooped, Martha jumped up and down, and the Doctor dropped the controls and grabbed Rose. He spun her around in a circle and she laughed for joy.

"We did it!" she gasped.

He set her down, suddenly serious. "Not quite. We still have to deal with the Sontarans. Now that the gas is gone they don't have any reason not to attack."

"Well, what are we waiting for then, spaceman?" Donna asked.
smile. He cupped her cheek and kissed her gently, his movements achingly tender. After a moment he pulled back and rested his forehead against hers, then he pushed himself away and flicked a switch on the teleport. There was a flash of light and he was gone.
Rose stood for a moment, her eyes closed, concentrating very hard on breathing and not falling apart.
Later. She could fall apart later, after they were back in the TARDIS and she had him to herself. The battle was far from over, and someone needed to make sure that Martha and Donna knew what was to do just in case they didn't come back, and there was the small matter of a jeopardy-friendly Time Lord who needed to be rescued.

"What was that?" Donna asked from behind her.

"He was saying goodbye," Martha realized.

"No." Rose's voice was rough. "That was just in case." She pulled the sleeve of her hoodie up and revealed the Dimension Canon. She frowned as she pushed buttons, recalibrating it to do what it was originally intended: lock on to the Doctor's current position and take her to him.

"What are you doing?" That was Luke. His curiosity apparently was getting the better of his common sense.

"I'm going to get him," she replied shortly.

"Why did he have to leave?" Donna demanded. "Couldn't he have put the bloody thing on a timer?"

Rose shook her head. "Everyone gets a chance," she replied quietly. "Even your enemies. Especially your enemies. Everyone has a chance to do the right thing." She turned to face them and smiled. "Now, I'm off." She took a deep breath and let it out. "If everything goes pear shaped and we don't get back, I need the two of you to promise me something." Martha nodded. Donna looked like she wanted to argue, but remained silent. "I've got letters. The TARDIS will help you find them, just go in the console room and ask. I need you to make sure they get where they're intended to be. Jack can help you, just go to the Millennium Plaza tourist information booth in Cardiff. There'll be someone inside manning the desk. Tell them that Rose sent you, and Jack'll come right out." The two women nodded mutely. "Well then," Rose finished with another smile. "See you in a bit! And if something goes wrong, just—be fantastic." There was another flash of light, and she was gone.

The Doctor set the atmospheric converter down just outside the teleport pod. General Staal turned from his post in front of the massive window that took up most of the Battleship's wall and grinned. "Oh, excellent!" the alien said.

"You know what this is, Staal," the Doctor replied in a voice like steel. His hand hovered over the trigger. "There's still another option. You can go, just leave. The Sontaran high command need never know what happened here."

"Your stratagem would be wise if Sontarans feared death," Staal noted, "but we do not." He raised the wand-like weapon that was a badge of his office. "At arms!"
"I'll do it, Staal!" the Doctor snapped. "If it saves the Earth, I'll do it!"

"A warrior doesn't talk, he acts!" the general replied.

"I am giving you the chance to leave." His voice was low and dangerous, a growl of pure frustration. He was trying to explain, to make them see how futile their actions were, but they refused to understand.

"And miss the glory of this moment? Never!"

"All weapons locked on the Earth, sir," a voice crackled over the intercom. Firing in twenty.

"I'm warning you!" the Doctor yelled.

"And I salute you. Take aim!" A flash of light came from behind the Doctor and a hand on his arm made him jump.

"Well, they're certainly hospitable," Rose commented dryly.

"What are you doing here?" he asked through clenched teeth.

"Saving your life," she replied simply.

He let go of the controller with one hand and grabbed at her wrist. She positioned his hand over the Dimension Canon. "Now!" he barked and depressed the switch that would fire a flaming missile into the Sontaran ship's air and ignite it. There was sudden, blinding, heat, and then darkness.

The Doctor blinked. No, it was still dark. Was he blind? He'd closed his eyes, had the flames gotten to them anyway? "Rose?" he called.

"Right here," she replied from behind him. He turned and a sliver of light was visible from beneath what appeared to be a door.

"Are we in a cupboard?" he asked.

"I think we are," she replied, her smile plain in her voice.

He huffed. "And you said that my landings are bad!"

A hand ran quite deliberately up his arm and he tilted his head back to allow small fingers to curl in his hair. She tugged his head down gently and he could feel her breath against his ear. "What makes you think I didn't intend for us to land in a cupboard?" she inquired.

He paused. "But, this is a—a broom cupboard, if I'm not mistaken. There are lots of other places we could have landed, much more comfortable."

"I wanted some privacy," she murmured in his ear.

"Oh," he replied. For some reason his highly functioning brain was focused on registering exactly how close she was pressed against him.

She pressed her lips against his neck in a quick kiss. "Do I have your attention?"

"Most definitely," he replied, a tad breathlessly.
"Good." Then she pulled back and slapped him.

"Ow!" His hand flew to his stinging cheek. "What was that for?"

"I did not spend a hundred and seventy years in a parallel universe, twelve years searching for you, and one year guarding Marth Jones so that you could go and get yourself blown up!" she snapped. "I have a bloody Dimension Cannon that, while not as posh as your TARDIS, does in fact travel through time and space, you báichí¹¹ Time Lord! That wasn't a plan, that was a tā mā de ust suicide run! You can't regenerate if you're in a million pieces, so don't you even try to use that excuse. And you call humans 'stupid apes!' Of all the thick, half-baked—"

He tried several times to get a word in edgewise, but when Rose was angry that was very difficult, and when she started insulting him in Chinese he realized that there was no way around it. The Doctor covered her mouth with his hand. Rose mumbled something that sounded vaguely like a threat to bite his fingers off, and he figured that if he could see her she'd be glaring at him, but it was a risk he had to take. "I know, Rose," he said softly. "I knew that you would come after me. I was counting on it, but I had to say something, just in case." He laughed mirthlessly. "My plans have a way of going awry, if you hadn't noticed. Now, can I remove my hand, or are you going to keep yelling at me?"

She reached up and peeled his fingers off of her mouth. They stood silent, pressed against each other for a moment, and then her lips were on his and his hand was tangled in her hair and this was how he would have kissed her if he knew for certain he wasn't coming back. She pulled away, panting slightly, and jerked his head down by her ear again. "If you ever do that again," she whispered. "I will slap you so hard you regenerate, and you know I can." Then she started kissing him again and he forgot how to breathe.

"Rose," he gasped. "Donna and Martha, they're waiting for us."

"Time Machine," she reminded him.

"Oh. Right." He occupied himself with the zip of her hoodie for a moment. "But, in a broom cupboard?"

"Unless you object?" she replied, and stopped unbuttoning his shirt.

"N-no," he stammered. "No objections here, not a one. It's brilliant, really. Molto bene! Fantastic, even."

"Doctor?"

"Yes Rose?" he asked, his mouth dry.

"Shut up."

If Donna Noble noticed that the Doctor seemed more mussed than singed when he and Rose returned three minutes after the blonde woman vanished she kept her observations to herself. She couldn't, however, keep from smiling at the slightly bemused expression the Doctor's face seemed frozen in, or the smug, self-satisfied smirk that adorned Rose's features. She looked like the cat who got the canary.

"Right," the Doctor said after Martha and Donna tackled him and then proceeded to lecture him severely for several minutes. Donna in particular had managed to come up with some very interesting consequences should he ever attempt to heroically sacrifice himself again. He had promised several
times that he would refrain from doing so, mostly out of fear and with little intention of actually keeping said promises. He was the Doctor, after all, and one of his prerogatives was the ability to sacrifice himself for the universe. He would just have to do it when he was far away from both Donna and Rose, who were, after all, formidable slappers. "Now, I need to take you, Martha Jones, back to UNIT. Unless you'd like to come with us?" He waggled his eyebrows in invitation.

Martha smiled, but shook her head. "No, Doctor. I've got a job to do here on Earth." She crossed her arms over her chest and fixed him with a level stare. "But don't think you can get out of visiting!"

"We'll make sure he comes back," Rose promised. Donna agreed.

"He is right here," the Doctor reminded them. It was always a bit disconcerting when companions ganged up on him, especially these three.

Martha hovered just inside the TARDIS door. Rose was outside talking to Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart. It was tempting to remain where she was and possibly overhear their conversation, but she still had her goodbyes to make. She hugged Donna. "It was nice to meet you, really," she told the ginger woman. "You make sure to keep himself in line, now."

Donna grinned. "You can count on that."

"She doesn't let me get away with anything," the Doctor confirmed. "And she slaps harder than Rose."

"So, Luke Rattigan was working with the Sontarans," the Brigadier mused. "Dr. Jones suspected as much."

"If I could make a suggestion, sir," Rose ventured.

The Brigadier chuckled. "You travel with the Doctor, Miss Tyler. I don't believe I could stop you from doing anything, if you truly wanted to do it." He looked at her knowingly. "Nor, do I believe, could he, although he certainly would try."

One side of her mouth tugged upwards in a half-smile. "He's nothing if not stubborn, sir. But about Luke." The Brigadier frowned. "He is a genius, but he's like a child. He needs discipline, but he could be useful. The Doctor helped a bit, I think." She sighed. "The boy is too clever for his own good, and he's not used to anyone telling him 'no.'"

"He did help an alien race attempt to conquer the world, and he contributed to the deaths of hundreds," the Brigadier pointed out.

"Yes," Rose replied with a nod. "And he should have to bear the consequences, but someday he might deserve a second chance. Just—keep it in mind."

"I will," the Brigadier replied after a moment.

She smiled then, a wide, joyous expression. "Good. Now I'd best get back before he gets antsy and decides to leave without me." She held out her hand. "It was good to see you again, sir."

He took her hand and shook it. "It was good to meet you again, Miss Tyler."

A wind fierce wind kicked up leaves and dust. Rose covered her eyes with her arm as a wheezing groan echoed through the now-empty ATMOS factory. When the wind died down and the dust and
leaves returned to their place on the ground the TARDIS was gone. Rose and the Brigadier stared at the alley where the ship had been.

"Oh, when I catch that man," Rose ground out through clenched teeth, "he is so regenerating!"

The TARDIS door slammed shut and the ship began to shake. Martha clung to one of the support struts that stretched to the ceiling like a giant tree. Donna staggered up the ramp to the jump seat, and the Doctor danced madly around the console.

"What?" he exclaimed, his eyes wide and his hair disheveled. "What are you doing? Stop that! Rose is still out there!" He pushed buttons and pulled levers but nothing happened.

"Doctor!" Martha screamed. "You take me back! You take me back right now!"

"I can't!" he replied frantically. "She's doing it herself!"

"What?" Donna demanded.

"The TARDIS! She's flying herself!" The room tilted and spun and the Doctor held on to the console for dear life. Rose, he thought, was going to kill him.

*idiot

**fucking
"What the hell is it doing?" Donna cried as the console sparked. The TARDIS bucked again and Martha's feet swung off the floor.

The Doctor was furiously pressing buttons and flipping switches, but nothing happened. "Control isn't working!" he yelled back. "I have no idea where we're headed!" His gaze fell on the strange, clear container that held the hand he lost in his duel with the Sycorax. He trusted Captain Jack, but not with that. If anyone knew what it was whole planets would be declaring war on Earth to get a hold of it. A single sample could change the history of the universe. The liquid was bubbling, as it often did, but the hand itself was glowing with a cool blue light. "My hand is certainly excited," he noted.

Donna stared at him. "You told me that was some alien relic!"

"It's his!" Martha called from her position clinging to one of the support struts. "Got chopped off and he grew another one!"

"You are impossible!" Donna's eyes were wide as she gripped the jump-seat's back.

The Doctor grinned at her. "Nah, just a bit unlikely, and when Rose finds us, slightly dead." The TARDIS gave one last heave, and then it was still. Martha let go of the support strut and clutched her stomach.

"I think I'm gonna be sick," she gasped.

"Bathroom's third door on the left," the Doctor instructed. "No getting sick on the TARDIS. She'll lock us out for sure."

Donna hadn't relinquished her grip on the jump-seat. "Not sure if my legs'll work," she explained. "Feel like I've been turned into jelly."

The Doctor didn't respond. Instead, he bolted to the door. Donna groaned and followed, while Martha brought up the rear with her hand still pressed against her middle. The TARDIS had landed in a tunnel. Twisted sheets of metal and hoops of wire littered the area around them. It was dark and the air was cool and damp. They were definitely underground. It was impossible to move quickly through their surroundings. The various obstacles looked almost deliberate, but what would the point of that be?

"Why did the TARDIS bring us here?" Donna asked as she and Martha joined the Doctor outside.

"Oh, I love this bit," Martha said, and her whole face lit up.

"Thought you wanted to go home?" Donna replied with a bit of a smile.

"Right. Yeah, home." Martha nodded. "But still—there's that feeling you get."
"Like you've swallowed a hamster," Donna agreed.

The Doctor, meanwhile, was examining their surroundings. He ran his hands over one of the metal barriers. It was dented and punctured. The metal was bent away from them, meaning the projectile had come from behind their current location. He licked the metal next to the hole and frowned. Gunpowder residue. These were bullet shields—cover possibly for soldiers. But they weren't professional. The metal looked like scrap, not something a proper army would use. Vigilantes, then? Guerilla fighters?

"Don't move!" a voice barked from behind them. "Drop your weapons!"

"Stay where you are!" a second voice ordered.

The Doctor raised his hands next to his head and Martha and Donna followed suit. "We're not armed, look, no weapons," he told them, flashing his hands so that the men could see they were empty. "Never any weapons, not us. We're safe."

Three men dressed in green coveralls stepped forward. They were each holding a very large gun, and they were dirty. Dark smudges marred their faces and clothing. It might have been dirt or grease, or possibly old blood. "Look at their hands," one of the men said. "They're clean."

"All right," another, presumably the leader, said. "Process them. Him first." He gestured the gun at the Doctor, who was standing closest. The other two grabbed the Time Lord and twisted his arms behind his back.

"Oi!" he shouted as they frog marched him forward. "Oi! There's no need to be hostile! What's wrong with clean hands?"

"Doctor!" Donna cried, but the leader had his gun trained on her and Martha and she was forced to watch, helpless.

"Leave him alone!" Martha yelled.

The men ignored them. They pulled the Doctor's left hand forward and shoved it deep into a large machine that sat up against the wall. "What's going on?" he demanded. Then he felt the walls of the chamber constrict, holding his arm steady. The pressure was unpleasant, but not painful. "Something tells me this isn't about to check my blood pressure," he quipped and glanced back at the leader.

Something sharp and hot cut into his hand. He yelped.

"What are you doing to him?" Donna asked angrily. She was working herself up to full fury, and then those little boys wouldn't know what hit them.

"Everyone gets processed," the leader replied. He was young, hardly older than Martha, if that. He shouldn't be handling a gun, he should be at University, or out with his mates, she thought as she glared at them. Whatever society they'd landed in, she didn't like it.

"It's taken a tissue sample," the Doctor noted, and then winced. "And extrapolated it." He glanced around for confirmation, but received only blank looks. "Some kind of accelerator?" Suddenly the chamber walls receded and released him. He staggered back and Martha caught him.

"Are you all right?" she asked briskly and started examining the arm that had been trapped in the machine. A 'y' shaped burn covered the back of his hand, but other than that he appeared to be fine. There wasn't even any bruising.
The Doctor was staring at the machine. Beyond the hand-biting bit there was a thick tube that connected to what looked to Donna like a large shower stall. Frosted glass doors seemed to contain some kind of blue gas that swirled in a wind they didn't feel. "Don't know," he said finally. His voice was far away, as if he was concentrating intensely on something else. "That—that's just—"

The machine groaned loudly, and the doors slowly opened. A girl stepped out of the mist. She was wearing a green shirt and tight black pants. Her straight blonde hair was pulled back into a pony tail. The Doctor stared at her like she was impossible, or she had three heads.

"Arm yourself," the leader said, and handed her one of the big guns. She looked confused for a moment, and then examined the weapon. After a moment she adjusted the grip and checked the ammunition. The weapon fit in her arms like she was born to wield it, which, in a sense, she was.

"Where did she come from?" Donna asked him, standing a bit closer.

The Doctor blinked. "From me," he said softly. His face was serious. All traces of the lighthearted tour guide or the goofy, exuberant spaceman were gone. He wasn't quite the Oncoming Storm, but he was getting there. The Doctor, the Time Lord, looked out from behind her best friend's eyes.

"From you?" She didn't understand. "How? Who is she?"

"She's, well, she's—" He trailed off. "She's my daughter."

The girl seemed to notice them for the first time. She set the gun against her hip and smiled at the Doctor. "Hello Dad."

The apparent leader of the soldiers pulled the girl away from the Doctor, Martha, and Donna. "Are you primed to take orders, ready to fight?" he questioned her.

"Instant mental download of all strategic and military protocols, sir," she replied crisply. "Generation five thousand soldier, primed and in peak physical health." She grinned and cocked the weapon. "Oh, I'm ready." The man grinned in reply, and they took up position behind one of the twisted, perforated metal barriers.

"I'm sorry," Donna began, "did you say 'daughter'?"

The Doctor was watching the blonde girl. "Technically, she is."

"Technically?" Martha's eyebrows shot up. "Technically how?"

"Progenation," the Doctor replied. "It's reproduction from a single organism. One parent is the biological mother and father." He tore his eyes away from the girl and the boy with their guns and strode over to examine the machine. "They take a sample of diploid cells, split them into haploids, and then recombine them in a different arrangement and grow—apparently very quickly." Just beyond the machine one of the soldiers was attaching something yellow and flashing to the side of the tunnel. In the Doctor's experience, things that flashed were usually bombs, or strange children's toys. And really, why would anyone make a toy that could be confused with a bomb? It just didn't make sense.

Heavy footsteps echoed down the corridor. "Something's coming," the girl said. Her gun went from resting against the metal barrier to nestled against her shoulder. The position looked frighteningly natural. The Doctor grabbed Martha and Donna's hands and urged them to take a step back, closer to the TARDIS. If things got ugly, he wanted a way out.
The sound of gun shots joined the footsteps. "It's the Hath!" the leader cried, and opened fire. The Hath were bipedal creatures that looked like a cross between a human, a fish, and a lizard. They wore black jumpsuits and carried guns that were identical to those the humans were using.

"Get down!" the girl shouted and motioned for the three travelers to hide. Bullets ricocheted off of the metal sheets around them. Martha ducked behind one while the Doctor and Donna sheltered behind another. The Hath kept coming. The humans were outnumbered at least two to one. One man fell, and then the other, and only the leader and the girl were left standing.

"We have to blow the tunnel!" the leader cried.

One of the Hath covered Martha's mouth with its hand and pulled her from her hiding spot. She struggled, but the alien was strong, too strong for her. The Doctor jumped up and tried to get to her, but the girl grabbed the detonator from one of the dead soldiers.

"Don't!" the Doctor yelled. "Martha!"

The girl slammed the button down. "We have to run!" she yelled. The light on top of the yellow square on the wall flashed faster. They ran.

The explosion ripped through the tunnel. They were far enough away, but Martha had been right next to it. Had the Hath realized what was happening? Had they run too? Or was she dead, buried in the rubble? His hearts constricted and a painful pressure seemed to settle on his chest. She had a family and a fiancée who loved her. He really, really didn't want to have to tell them that he'd gotten their daughter, sister, lover killed. "You've sealed off the tunnel," he said quietly. Anger was boiling just beneath the surface of his voice, barely restrained. "Why did you do that?"

The girl stared at him. "They were trying to kill us!" she pointed out.

"Yes, and they've got my friend!" The anger was out now, the Oncoming Storm roaring around him.

She took a step back, but did not submit. "Collateral damage," she assessed. "At least you've still got her." The girl nodded at Donna. "He's lost both his men. I'd say you've come out ahead."

It was the wrong thing to say. "Her name is Martha!" Donna snapped. "And she's not 'collateral damage!' No one is! Have you got that, G.I. Jane?"

The girl looked dazed. The Doctor turned away. "I'm going to find her," he told Donna, but the last soldier turned his gun on them.

"You're going nowhere," he replied. He was frowning, like he was trying to work out a difficult puzzle or a complex equation. "You don't make sense, you two." He almost seemed to be talking to himself more than them. "No guns, no marks, no fight in you." The Doctor shifted forward just a bit, so that Donna was out of the line of fire.

"If you get yourself regenerated now, spaceman," she whispered. "Rose will kill you."

He ignored her. The soldier was still talking. "I'm taking you to General Cobb. Now move!"

Apparently the soldier trusted them enough to walk in front of them. The Doctor considered running away, but eventually discarded the notion. The boy had a gun and he knew how to use it, and the Doctor didn't fancy any more people dying. Martha wasn't dead, he told himself. The Hath were resourceful, surely they realized what was going on. She was fine, and hopefully safer than they
"What's your name?" Donna asked the girl. "I'm Donna."

"Don't know," the girl replied. "It's not been assigned yet."

The ginger woman blinked. "If you don't know that, what do you know?"

The blonde girl considered for a moment. "How to fight."

"Nothing else?" Donna was confused.

"The machine must embed military history and tactics, but no name." The Doctor shrugged. "She's a generated anomaly."

Donna mused for a moment. "Oh! How about Jenny! You know, from 'generated'?"

The girl smiled. "I like that, Jenny. That's a good name. Thank you, Donna."

"What do you think, dad?" Donna asked the Doctor. "Rose is gonna love this. Usually it's the women who show up one day with a child. You just can't be typical, can you?"

"As good as anything, I suppose," he replied noncommittally. He was trying his best not to look at her. It wasn't her fault, wasn't like she'd asked to be created or anything, but when he looked at her he saw them. His family. His children. Susan. And the pain ripped into him, suddenly fresh and raw and very, very present. It was like the universe was mocking him, showing him an echo of what he wanted. And he did want. He wanted his family back, he wanted a family with Rose—maybe, one day, if she wanted it too. He wanted the universe to be kind, for once, to give him something without jerking it away again.

"Not much of a natural parent, are you?" Donna continued to press.

"They stole a tissue sample at gun point and processed it," he replied more sharply than he meant to. "Not what I'd call natural parenting." He was trying to be patient, he really was. Donna didn't know that he'd had a family before; she didn't know because he didn't tell her. And that was fine, really. He didn't want everyone to know. The only person he'd told was Rose, and he wished that she was here. She would understand, would take his hand and let him know that she loved him and that everything would turn out all right.

"Rubbish," Donna dismissed his objections with a wave of her hand. "My friend Nerys fathered twins with a turkey baster. Didn't bother her."

"You can't just extrapolate a relationship from a biological accident," he protested.

"Child support agency can," she countered.

He glared at her. "Look, just because I share similar physiological traits with simian primates doesn't make me a monkey's uncle!"

The girl, Jenny, had had enough. She turned around and faced them, eyes blazing. "I'm not a monkey! Nor am I a child, thank you very much." Then she turned on her heel and marched through the door behind the soldier boy.

"So, where are we?" the Doctor asked the soldier as they entered a cavernous room. "What planet is this?"
"Messaline," the boy replied. "Well, what's left of it."

They wound through small clusters of soldiers. There were people everywhere. Some were gathered around fires, some were stretched out on cots, presumably sleeping. Others were cleaning and cooking or tending to their weapons. The soldier led them to an older man. His short beard was shot through with white and his coverall hung loosely over his wiry frame.

Donna stared at their surroundings, clearly puzzled. "But, this is a theatre."

"Maybe they're producing 'Miss Saigon,'" the Doctor suggested flippantly. He slouched onto one of the cots.

"It's like a whole city underground," Donna said, her eyes wide. "But why?"

The older man came toward them, his face wary and his posture tense. The Doctor stood. "General Cobb, I presume?" His posture was relaxed and his tone light, but something deadly serious pooled behind his eyes. He did not like what he'd seen of this planet so far, and he wasn't optimistic about what he hadn't yet seen.

"You were found in the Western tunnels, I'm told," Cobb replied, "with no marks." He examined the Doctor's face, weighing how much he could trust the two strangers. "There was an outbreak of pacifism in the Eastern zone three generations back, before we lost contact. Is that where you came from?"

The Doctor jumped on the cover story. "Yeah, Eastern zone, that's us. I'm the Doctor, and this is Donna."

"And I'm Jenny," the girl said brightly.

Cobb was not impressed. "Don't think you can infect us with your peacemaking. We're committed to the fight to the very end."

"Well, that's alright," the Doctor replied brightly. "Can't stay anyway; got to go find my friend." He tried not to think about how ridiculous the man sounded. After all, the Doctor had been to the end of the fight and it was a cold, bitter place. Winning meant nothing when balanced against the cost.

"That's not possible," Cobb dismissed them casually. "All movement is regulated. We're at war."

Some of the Doctor's good cheer drained away. War was always a distasteful subject. He'd seen enough of it to last him through all of his remaining regenerations and then some. He'd seen battles that made this war look like a day at the park, but what would the general know of that? He would probably spout some propaganda about the glory of dying in battle. "Yes," he replied dryly. "I noticed. With the Hath." He paused. "But tell me, 'cause we're a bit out of circulation, what with the communication break down and all, who are the Hath?"

They were in a cell, again. Why was it that traveling with the Doctor seemed to include the universe's tour of prisons? The Doctor and Donna sat on the cot, their backs against the cold stone wall. Jenny stood by the bars, staring into the corridor.

"Well," Donna said after a long moment of silence. "At least we were introduced to the man in charge before we ended up here. That's a rarity."

The Doctor rolled his eyes. "I'm not that bad, Donna."
"Are too!" she snapped back. "Last three jails we've been in your mouth got us there within five minutes of landing."

"Are you two in prison a lot, then?" Jenny asked, one eyebrow cocked up.

The Doctor grunted, but Donna continued as if she hadn't heard. "And the cheek of that man! 'Your woman,' as if I'd sleep with you!"

"Oi!" the Doctor protested.

"Don't know what Rose sees in you," Donna replied. "You're a twig! Me, I like something to hold on to."

He groaned. "Donna Noble, this is not a conversation I ever want to have with you. In prison, or anywhere else."

"If you hadn't run your mouth about how their beliefs are myth, then we might not be here," she pointed out.

"I have to stop them," he reminded her. "I can't just let them slaughter the Hath."

"Never said you did," she responded. Her eyes drifted to the metal plaque above the door to the cell. There were number stamped on it, an eight digit code similar to the plaques she'd seen in the tunnel and the theatre. "More numbers," she murmured. "They've got to mean something."

"Makes as much sense as that 'breath of life' story," the Doctor sneered.

Jenny looked hurt. "You mean that isn't true?"

"No, sweetheart," Donna said. "It's a myth, a story."

"Yeah," the Doctor added, "but there could still be something in that temple, something that became a myth." His eyes went misty for a while. "I've met people like that."

Donna frowned. "How do you mean?"

The Doctor leaned back. "Oh, a piece of technology, a weapon."

"And if the 'Source' is a weapon, we've just given directions to Captain Nut-job," Donna continued, her eyes wide. "That's not good."

"Not good, no," the Doctor agreed. "Which is why we need to get out of here, find Martha, and stop Cobb from slaughtering the Hath." He paused. "Oh, and find Rose and make sure she doesn't kill me."

Jenny blinked. "Who is this 'Rose,' and why does she want to kill you?"

Donna smirked. "She's his woman, or maybe he's her Time Lord. We got yanked here without her, and she's going to be right pissed."

"She says I get into too much trouble on my own," the Doctor huffed. "I'm nine hundred and three years old, I can take care of myself."

"You say this while we're in prison," Donna pointed out.

"I'm working on a plan!" he snapped back.
Donna rolled her eyes. "I rest my case."

The Doctor turned away from her and instead focused on Jenny, who was watching them intently. "What—what—what are you staring at?" he sputtered.

"You keep insisting that you're not a soldier," she replied, "but look at you, drawing up strategies like a proper general. Albeit, a general with very disrespectful troops." Donna snorted.

"No," the Doctor thrust his hands out in denial. "No. I'm trying to stop the fighting."

"Aren't all soldiers?" she shot back.

"Well, I suppose," he began. But that's—that's—oh, I haven't got time for this!" He held out his hand. "Donna, give me your phone." He pulled out the sonic screwdriver. "Time for an upgrade."

"And now you've got a weapon!" Jenny exclaimed.

"No!" he snapped. "It's not a weapon, it's a screwdriver, and I need to modify your phone, Donna, so that Rose can get a hold of us and I can tell her where we are."

"You're using it to fight back," the blonde girl pointed out. She grinned. "Oh, I'm going to learn so much from you! You are such a soldier."

"Donna, can you tell her?" He would not meet Jenny's eyes. Instead he kept his head down, pretending to be engrossed in turning his companion's mobile into a superphone.

"Oh, you are speechless!" Donna couldn't help but grin. It was such a rare phenomena! Usually Rose was the only one who could stop up his great big gob. "I'm loving this. You keep on, Jenny," she told the girl.

The Doctor snapped the cover back on her phone and glared at Donna. He held the mobile against his ear and prayed that she would pick up. Oh, Rose was going to kill him.

Back on Earth, Rose Tyler's mobile began to ring. She set the Dimension Canon down and answered. "Hello."

"Rose, it's me." The Doctor's voice floated up out of the speaker.

"D'you have a death-wish?" she snapped. "Right after I told you what would happen if you vanished again, Doctor, an' you just swan off?"

"It's not my fault!" He sounded genuinely distressed. "I swear, Rose. The TARDIS took off all by herself, brought us to some planet called Messaline. Martha was still on-board and everything."

She sighed and rubbed her temples. She could feel a Doctor-sized headache coming on. "Right. Look, if you stay where you are I should be able to get a fix on your position and meet you there."

"How?" he asked, clearly shocked.

"The Dimension Canon," she said matter-of-factly. "It was designed to get me back to you, Doctor. It tracks you through your TARDIS key. Only reason it took me so long to get to you in the first place was 'cause you were jumping time tracks like mad."

"Right." He exhaled loudly. "Well, we're in prison, so we'll be stationary for a little bit."
"I'll see you soon then."

"Yeah." There was silence for a moment. God, he was rubbish on the phone.

"I love you, Doctor."

"You too, Rose." And she hung up.

The Doctor ended the call and took a deep breath. "Rose will be here soon."

"She still got that Cannon thing?" Donna asked. He nodded.

"Your woman travels with a cannon?" Jenny looked eagerly between them. "Is she a soldier too?"

The Doctor ran a hand through his hair. "It isn't a weapon, it's a traveling device," he explained. "And no, Rose is not a soldier." He started dialing again, more to get a reprieve from uncomfortable questions that anything else.

"Who are you calling now?" Donna demanded.

"Martha," he replied. "We need to talk."

The Doctor had just finished instructing Martha Jones to stay where she was when a flash of white light filled the cell. He threw his arm over his eyes and noted that Donna was doing the same. He couldn't see Jenny. He wasn't sure he wanted to. But then the light faded and Rose was standing in the middle of the cell looking distinctly put-out. She glanced around.

"Not the worst place we've been," she admitted with the hint of a smile. "But not the best either."

The Doctor remained where he was. "Are you going to slap me again?" he asked warily.

She rolled her eyes. "No, I am not going to slap you. Honestly, Doctor, you are so thick sometimes."

He stood then and let her pull him into a hug. "I was worried and I was angry. Still not happy, but not going to slap you." She pulled back a bit and studied his face. Something was wrong, more wrong than it should be. There was an aching pain in his eyes that bled through his careful control and etched lines into his face. He looked weary and angry. "Doctor," she said softly and cupped his cheek with her hand. "What's wrong? Did they hurt you or Donna or Martha?" She looked around and noted the strange woman standing off to the side. "Where is Martha? Doctor, was she injured?"

He shook his head. "No, no she's fine. She's at the Hath camp. There are these aliens called Hath, and they're at war with the people here."

"Then what is it?" His eyes closed and he leaned into her touch.

When he opened them he was staring at the strange blonde woman. "Rose, this is Jenny," he said, nodding at the girl. "Technically she's my daughter."
Coming to Terms

Chapter Notes

Quotes taken from 'The Doctor's Daughter.'

Jenny assumed a defensive position as soon as the light hit her eyes. It was unlike anything she'd experienced, but the military history stored in her brain informed her that it was comparable to a flash grenade. At least it was silent. Her nervous system seemed to be a tad sensitized from her recent—birth, creation, genesis? It was confusing, trying to wrap her existence around the paradigm of life that her father and Donna seemed to follow.

The light faded, and a blonde woman was standing in the middle of the cell. She looked young, maybe a few years older than Jenny, and she was wearing strange clothing. The coat—black leather—at least looked functional, and her shoes were sturdy trainers, good for running, but her shirt was pink and quite bright. It would be poor camouflage in a battle fought in dark tunnels.

The woman, Rose, presumably, was speaking with her father. It was an odd concept, the idea of fatherhood. What exactly did it entail? He certainly didn't seem to feel protective or supportive of her, as her 'programming' informed her he should. Instead he was constantly mocking her, attempting to relegate her to a position of inferiority because she did what she was created to do: fight back. Donna was better, but she seemed determined to treat Jenny like a child, which she wasn't. She was a fully formed, functional adult with a mind of her own. When would they start treating her as such?

Movement pulled her out of her mind and back into the present. Her father was standing with his arms around Rose. His whole attitude had changed, and the shift fascinated her. She was so curious about social interactions—the machine gave her the ability to read people, to follow and anticipate their movements and their expressions, but she didn't know what the little bits of information meant yet. The stiffness was gone from his shoulders as he regarded the woman in his arms. She, on the other hand, was still guarded, although she was allowing Jenny a view of her unprotected back, so she felt fairly secure and in control of the situation. She stretched out a hand and touched his cheek, and his eyes closed. When they opened again he was staring at Jenny, who was standing by the bars still, her arms crossed defensively in front of her chest.

"Rose," he said softly, "this is Jenny. Technically she's my daughter."

There it was again, the need to clearly demarcate that she wasn't 'real' as Donna had said earlier. She wasn't properly his, just a 'biological mistake.' Rose turned to face her and Jenny blinked. She had expected confusion, possibly the same scorn and distrust she saw in her father's eyes, but they were noticeably absent. The woman was curious and—was that something like hope she saw flickering in the dark brown orbs?

"Hello," the woman said with a wide smile. "My name's Rose, Rose Tyler."

She nodded in response. "I'm Jenny. I've heard a bit about you."

The other woman shot a quick glance at the Doctor. "Telling tales?" she asked with the hint of a smile, but then her face turned serious. She turned back to Jenny. "Are you from the future, our future, I mean?" The hope was back, and tempered with a sort of—longing?
Realization lit up the Doctor's face and he placed a hand on her shoulder. "No, Rose. She's not from our future." Her face fell, just a bit and just for a moment, but he noticed. Regret colored his voice when he spoke again—but regret for what? That she existed? That she wasn't from the future—whatever that meant? That he was having this conversation? "They have a machine that was supposed to be used to help them produce colonists, but they modified it to make soldiers. They took a tissue sample and extrapolated it into, well, her."

"I am right here, you know," Jenny pointed out tartly. "I'm getting tired of you two talking like I'm not present, or worse, a child."

Rose sighed. "Typical. Being rude again?"

"Yes," Donna piped up from the cot.

Shouts from down the corridor prevented the Doctor from replying. General Cobb was speaking just loud enough so they caught echoes of his voice, but were unable to distinguish his words. They could, however, make out the soldiers' response. "At last we march to war!" reverberated off the cool stone walls. It was a mantra they chanted over and over again.

The Doctor turned away from Rose and helped Donna off the cot. "They're getting ready to head out," he said, his face dark with anger. "We need to get out of here."

"We'll have to get past the guard," Donna pointed out.

Jenny uncrossed her arms and grinned. "I can deal with him." She moved closer to the bars, but the Doctor grabbed her arm and guided her away.

"You're not going anywhere," he said firmly. "You belong here, with them."

Jenny stared at him, eyes wide and wounded. "What?" She knew that he disliked her, that he seemed to find her repulsive, but he couldn't abandon her! Where would she go? The soldiers had deemed her untrustworthy, and now he was rejecting her as well.

Donna moved to stand next to the girl. "She belongs with us, with you. She's your daughter!" she snapped back, her voice heavy with shock.

"She's a soldier," he replied. His voice and face were harsh and set, like he was forged in steel. "She came out of that machine." Rose watched the three of them silently, assessing the situation. The Doctor fairly vibrated with suppressed anger and Donna reflected his ire right back at him. Jenny stood to the side radiating hurt and confusion. Their eyes met, and she felt a pang of sympathy for the young woman. She didn't deserve this. Rose remembered how it felt when Pete rejected her—it was awful. It made her want to crawl under the covers and curl up in a ball and not come out. In fact, she might have done just that if the Doctor hadn't been there to drag her back to her mum. Jenny didn't even have that. The only vaguely parental figure she had was turning her away. Rose couldn't imagine growing up without her mother. Jackie hadn't been the best parent, but she loved her daughter and tried to do right by her.

Donna was brilliant and Rose knew that she was trying to make the Doctor face what she thought was his unreasoning dislike for the young woman who stood before them, but she had only part of the picture. This wasn't about Jenny, not really. It was about the family that he'd lost so many years ago. He'd been a father once, he had said in the TARDIS, working on a way to help Chloe Webber and the Isolus—two scared kids who found each other. How painful must it be to see the echo of something that she knew he'd give up all of his remaining regenerations to get back?
It wasn't about Jenny, but Rose wasn't going to let her get caught up and hurt by the Doctor's past. He needed to face what he lost before he could grow, and the universe needed him to grow, to never stop growing.

"Oh, yes," Donna was saying. "I know that bit." She opened her mouth to say more, but Rose cut her off.

"Stop it, you two!" she snapped and stepped in front of Jenny. The Doctor was glaring at Donna, who was glaring right back. Rose took his hand and he turned his gaze on her. She could see the pain seething beneath the anger, feeding it. This was going to hurt, oh it would hurt, but when a broken bone mended wrong, it had to be re-broken and set properly. He needed to hurt so he could heal. "Doctor," she said softly, "d'you still have that stethoscope?" He nodded very slightly. "Can I have it?" She held out her hand expectantly. He looked at it for a moment, then reached into one of his pockets and pulled out the stethoscope, the same one, she noted, that she'd used so many years ago to check his heartbeat. "Thanks," she told him, and pressed a quick kiss to his cheek. She turned to Jenny.

"What are you doing?" the young woman asked her nervously.

Rose smiled at her. "It's alright; it won't hurt. Just hold still." She placed the metal cup against Jenny's chest, first on the right side, then on the left. The sound of two hearts, both beating strong filled her ears. She could feel the Doctor's eyes on her, his gaze so concentrated that it was palpable in the still air of the cell. She pulled the plastic buds out of her ears and held the stethoscope out to the Doctor. "Come here," she said softly. "Come here and listen, and then tell me where she belongs."

He went grudgingly, as if he wanted to stop himself but couldn't. His long fingers wrapped around the cool metal and the agony in his eyes took her breath away. "Why are you doing this?" he asked her, his voice raw. It reminded her of another moment, another time when he was stark naked in front of her, despite his layers of clothing. The walls behind his eyes were down and she could see every emotion rippling in their chocolate brown depths.

"Because I love you," she replied gently. She tried to show him with her eyes, to let her complete and unconditional trust and love and support shine out so he could see.

He took the stethoscope from her and set the plastic buds in his ears. Rose moved the metal cup from one side of Jenny's chest to the other. The girl looked up at him, tears collecting in her eyes but she refused to let them fall. The lines that grief etched into his face deepened but the anger was gone. It drained out of him as a sound echoed in his ears that he'd never thought to hear again—the double heartbeat of his people.

He handed the stethoscope back to Rose and moved away from them until he was standing with his back against the wall. He needed the physical distance, as he could not apparently manage his usual emotional distance. "Two hearts," he noted, his voice carefully neutral. She knew that he was hurting. He was always oscillating between extremes, joyous or raging, exuberant or serious, but now his face and voice were flat—empty. She'd only seen it once, when he told her about his people and how he was the one to end the War. If she'd had access to the security camera footage from Canary Wharf she would have seen the same expression on his face as he stood with his cheek pressed against the white wall of the Void chamber. It was loss and grief and pain so deep that she could drown in it.

"She even looks like you," Rose told him with the hint of a smile on her face. "The blond you, anyway."

"Time Lord genetics," he replied in a voice that was barely above a whisper. "Regeneration makes
them a little complex."

"Does that mean she's a—what do you call a female Time Lord?" Donna asked. The anger had gone from her voice too, replaced by concern for both of them.

"What's a Time Lord?" Jenny asked, still confused and upset.

"I am," the Doctor replied without looking at her. "It's who I am. It's where I'm from."

"And I'm from you," Jenny reminded him.

"You're an echo, that's all," he cut her off. The heat was starting to creep back into his voice as he met and held her gaze. "A Time Lord is so much more—a sum of knowledge, a code, a shared history, a shared suffering!" He took a deep breath and his eyes slid shut. The fire that had flared up was apparently spent and he sagged back against the wall. "Of course, that's all gone now." He swallowed. "Gone forever."

"Except that it isn't." Rose had been silent, had let him get the words out but she couldn't remain so. "You're alive, Doctor, and you remember, and as long as something is remembered it's never really gone." She moved towards him slowly, like she was approaching a wounded animal. He stiffened like he wanted to run, but remained where he was. She took his hands and held them in her own. "You've been alone for so long," she said quietly, "but you don't have to be the last. All of those things that you said, you can teach her. You can show her."

"Why are you doing this?" he asked again.

"Because I've been there," she replied. "Pete might have been a parallel version of my dad, but he wasn't the same man. He met me when I was twenty-one years old, on the night he lost his wife. And when I—" her voice broke a bit at remembered pain. "When I fell," she continued, "when I was stuck living in that parallel world, he showed me that you choose to be a father. It wasn't easy—we were strangers and for the longest time we were awkward as hell, but we worked it out." She squeezed his hands and he reluctantly met her eyes. "I know it hurts," she told him. "I can't imagine how much, but just—think about it." He stared at her silently for a long moment, and then gave a tiny nod. She wrapped her arms around him and he returned the embrace, his cheek resting against the top of her head. They stayed locked together for a few minutes, and then she pulled back but she kept a hold of his hand.

"What happened?" Jenny asked. She had been quiet during their exchange, but her curiosity—no, it was more than curiosity. She needed to know what happened to her people, because they were her people. She hadn't been created in what she was sure was the 'usual way' for Time Lords, but she had at least a genetic link to them. Didn't she deserve to know? Didn't she deserve to understand what made him so angry?

"There was a war." His answer, when it came, was soft and broken. His voice was rough, just this side of hoarse, and flat.

"Like this one?" All of her understanding was based on the conflict at hand.

He laughed. It was a harsh, unpleasant sound—a bitter mirth. "Bigger. Much bigger."

"And you fought?" she pressed. A tiny nod. "And killed?"

Another nod, and a clenching of the jaw. "Yes," he replied softly as he examined the way his fingers wove together with Rose's.
Jenny stared at him. "Then how are we different?"

He had no answer for her, so he gave her none. He just looked at her with his soft brown eyes that were so old, too old for his young face, and she fancied that she could feel the pain leeching out from him, tendrils of ice and fire that stole her breath.

Jenny sidled up to the bars of the cell. The soldier who'd originally captured them and brought them to the General, and thus also to the cell, was standing just beyond her. "Hey," she said softly.

He glanced over. "I'm not supposed to talk to you," he replied with a smile. "I'm on duty."

"I know," she said, smiling back at him. "Guarding me." She paused and tilted her head to the side in a gesture she knew was becoming. "So, does that mean I'm dangerous?" she asked as she moved closer to him. "Or that I need protecting?" She pouted a bit and looked up at him through her eyelashes.

He turned to face her and stepped closer to the bars. "Protecting?" he asked with a laugh. "From what?"

"Oh, I don't know," she replied coquettishly. "Men like you?" Then she reached out, grabbed his jumper, pulled him against the bar, and snogged him thoroughly. In the process she managed to get his gun out of its holster. She clicked the safety off and released his mouth. He stared at her, dazed and a little confused by the sudden turn of events. Men, she thought, were far too easily distracted. "Keep quiet and open the door," she instructed with a sweet smile.

Donna grinned from her position against the wall of the cell. "I'd like to see you try that." She directed a pointed look at the Doctor.

Rose laughed. "That would only work if Captain Jack was our jailer."

"That's it!" the ginger woman announced. "After we get out of here, we are going to see Captain Jack Harkness. I've heard enough of the stories; I'd like to meet the man who kissed the Doctor and lived to tell the tale in person, thanks."

Jenny led them out of the cell and down a twisting stairway, back the way they had come before. She turned a corner only to be snatched back by the Doctor as a patrolling soldier came into sight. "That's the way out," he whispered. She cocked the gun she'd stolen from their guard, but he covered her hands with his own. "Don't you dare," he grated out.

"D'you want me to distract him?" Donna asked with a bit of a smirk. "I have picked up a few feminine wiles over the years."

The Doctor, who believed that majority of Donna's wiles to consist mainly of yelling and hitting, pursed his lips. "Ah, no Donna, best keep your wiles in reserve, for—you know—emergencies and all that."

"I could distract him," Rose offered. The Doctor frowned. He didn't doubt that she was more than capable of the task—he had firsthand experience, after all, with just how distracting she could be—but the only person he wanted her kissing was, well, himself.

"I don't think that will be necessary," he said, and reached into one of his dimensionally transcendent pockets. He rummaged around for a bit, and then grinned.
"What is it?" Donna asked.

He pulled out a large wind-up mouse. "A distraction," he replied.

After a brief disagreement over what the appropriate action following the distraction was (Jenny believed that knocking the guard unconscious was the way to go; the Doctor thought that she was entirely too violent), they made their way into the tunnels. They were walking down a section that looked just like the rest of the spaces—cluttered with twisted metal and wires, the walls covered with bits and pieces of machinery—anything to shore it up, really, when the Doctor stopped.

"This is it," he said, turning in a circle. "The lost tunnel." He strode toward one wall. "There must be a control panel somewhere!" He knelt and began scanning the surface with the sonic screwdriver.

Donna, meanwhile, was staring at one of the beams supporting the ceiling. A metal plaque, like the one in the prison cell and the theatre and the tunnel they had originally arrived in, adorned the beam. It bore the familiar eight-digit code, but the last two numbers were different. They were always different, on every plaque. "D'you have a pencil and paper?" she asked the Doctor. "It's more of those numbers, and they're counting down."

"Original builders must have left them," the Doctor replied as he rummaged around in his pockets. He procured a pen and some paper and handed them to Rose, who passed them on to Donna. "Some old cataloging system, probably."

"But then why would they be counting down?" She copied the numbers down, followed by those from the prison and theatre. "The cell ended in 1-6, and this one ends in 1-4."

Jenny frowned. "Always thinking—who are you people?"

"I told you," the Doctor said from his position on the floor. "I'm the Doctor."

"And I'm Rose, and that's Donna," she added as she ran her fingers along the wooden panels that lined the wall, searching for a hidden door or a pressure plate that would reveal the control panel.

"The Doctor?" Jenny continued. "That's it?"

"That's all he ever says," Donna muttered as she copied.

Jenny put her hands on her hips and leaned forward. She looked just a bit like Jackie Tyler when she did that, the Doctor thought. He found that it warmed him unexpectedly as it also made him leery. She wasn't going to slap him, was she? "So you don't have a name either!" She paused. "Are you an anomaly too?"

The Doctor looked at her like she'd grown a second head. "What? No!"

"Come off it!" Donna called. "You're the most anomalous bloke I've ever met."

"How many Time Lords," Rose asked casually, "d'you think would love a human?" He sputtered, but didn't contradict her. "Or better yet, a human who was reckless enough to absorb the Time Vortex? How many of them d'you think would regenerate to save someone who did that?" He didn't answer her. "You may not be a 'generated anomaly,' Doctor, but you're certainly one of a kind." She smiled. "Which is good. Don't think the universe could handle two of you."

"That," he said sternly, "was rude, Rose Tyler!" And then he crowed. "Found it!" He pulled off one of the wooden planks coating the wall to reveal a switchbox. He turned the sonic screwdriver on the
"What, exactly, are Time Lords for?" Jenny asked as she leaned in to watch him work.

"For?" He changed the setting and resumed sonicing the box. "They're not for anything."

"So what do you do then?" She appeared to be honestly curious.

"I travel through time and space," he replied.

"We help people," Rose elaborated. "When we can, and when they need it. We explore and discover new cultures and peoples."

"He saves planets," Donna continued, "rescues civilizations, defeats terrible creatures, and runs a lot." She paused. "Seriously, there's an obscene amount of running involved."

"How else will you keep your girlish figure?" Rose quipped and smiled, her tongue caught between her teeth. "Can eat anything you want on the TARDIS, safe in the knowledge that all those calories won't have a chance to collect."

One of the panels covering the wall slid back and the Doctor jumped up. "Oh yes!" he yelled. "We're in business!" The sound of gunfire from further down the corridor cut their celebration short. "What were you saying about running?" the Doctor asked with a grin. "Allons-y!"
They sprinted down the hidden tunnel. Over the pounding of her hearts and the rush of her blood through her veins Jenny could hear the heavy thud of boots hitting the floor. It was coming from behind them. The soldiers were gaining. They would shoot on sight. Cobb had embraced the knowledge that had been programmed into the machine. He truly believed that war with the Hath was right and that exterminating every last one of them was the only solution. He wouldn't listen to reason; he wouldn't be persuaded, and that made him incredibly dangerous. The knowledge the machine had given her pointed out that it was likely that the only way they would overcome him would involve his death, but she pushed it to the side. She did not believe that the strange man who was her father would willingly kill anyone.

She rounded a corner and nearly ran into the Doctor and Donna, who were standing in front of crisscrossed lines of red light. Rose, in turn, nearly ran into her. "What's the hold up?" the woman asked. She was breathing a bit more heavily than normal, but not alarmingly so. It was true, then, about the running. Jenny smiled to herself. She could get used to that. Adrenaline sang in her blood and the sheer freedom of physical movement made her want to jump for joy.

"No chance that's mood lighting?" Donna asked hopefully. The Doctor pulled out his windup mouse and tossed it into the lights. It exploded with a flash and a bang. Donna swallowed. "That's a no, then."

"Arming device," the Doctor muttered as he glanced wildly around the passage. His eyes landed on a blue box set into the wall. "Aha!" He ran to it and pulled off the front panel. Buttons were nestled in tangles of wires. Jenny watched him work while Rose kept her eyes on the passage behind them. Donna wandered over to another metal plaque that was fixed to the wall.

"There's more of those numbers," she called. "Always eight numbers, and always counting down the closer we get."

"Here we go!" he exclaimed as power returned to the device.

"You'd better be quick," Rose replied, her gaze still fixed on the corridor behind them. "The general's coming. And I can't beam all of us out."

Shouts echoed down the corridor. Jenny left the Doctor's side and started towards Rose. He grabbed her arm. "Where are you going?"

"I can hold them up," she said, her eyes wide and her face serious. "I can buy you some time."

"No," he said flatly. "We don't need any more dead."

"But it's them or us!" she protested.

"That doesn't mean you have to kill them!" he snapped.
"I'm trying to save your life!" She was staring at him, uncomprehending. He didn't make any sense. Every time she thought she had a handle on him he did something or said something that threw her assessment out the window.

"Not like this." His voice was firm and would allow no argument. "Listen to me, Jenny." A hint of desperation crept in. "After a while the killing infects you, and once it's done you're never rid of it. I don't—I don't want to be saved like that."

She shook her head. "But we don't have a choice."

"There is always a choice."

She looked at him for a moment like she was trying to tell him something with her eyes, and then she pulled out of his grip. "I'm sorry," she said, and ran down the hall.

"Jenny!" he yelled after her.

She didn't look back and she didn't stop. Maybe she couldn't be what he wanted her to be (whatever that was), but she could do this. She could give him enough time to get the lasers down and get to safety. She could help him find his friend and get away.

The Doctor whirled around and stalked back to the arming device. "See?" he asked Rose, his voice harsh as he aimed the sonic at the tangle of wires that spilled from the open panel. "Nothing but a soldier."

"You were a soldier once," she replied. "Is that all you are?" He said nothing. "Doctor, you are one of the most complex people I've ever met. People try over and over again to fit you into a little box and define who you are, but they can't." She crossed her arms and glared at him. "So why are you, a self-avowed genius, making the same mistake that idiots do on a daily basis?"

"She's just trying to help," Donna said softly.

He sighed. "I know." Then the lasers flickered and died. He pocketed the sonic. "Jenny!" he yelled. "Leave it! Come on!" He took Rose's hand, and they ran through the passage. There was a seventeen percent chance that the computer would be smart enough to loop the circuits and start the beams up again, and he really didn't want to have to try and disable it with the soldiers at his back. A gun to his head wasn't exactly the best motivation.

General Cobb stood in between the soldiers and Jenny. Her gun was locked, loaded, and aimed. If she squeezed the trigger now he would be dead in under a second—but he was unarmed. His gun was at his feet and his arms were out. "You're a child of the machine," he reasoned. "You're on my side. Join us!

"It's in your blood, girl!" he pressed. "Don't deny it!"

There is always a choice.

She raised her aim and let loose a single round. It sliced through the plastic tubing overhead and green gas cascaded down, obscuring the room. She dropped the gun and ran. Maybe fighting was in her blood, but so was running, and it didn't feel like a betrayal, as her machine-given knowledge suggested. It felt like a victory. She chose. Whatever happened, from this moment on she carved out her own destiny.
Too long, she was taking too long. The Doctor wanted to pace, but Rose was holding his hand and he didn't want to let her go. There was the sound of a single shot, and he thought that maybe his hearts would stop. He was being hard on her, too hard. He was being, as Rose would say, an 'unreasonable git,' but he couldn't stop himself. He wanted to push her away, to keep her at arm's length so that when he inevitably lost her it wouldn't hurt so much, but at the same time he wanted to pull her close, to feel the brush of her mind against his. It was lonely in his head, even with the TARDIS.

"Jenny, come on!" he yelled again. A few moments later she dashed around the corner, and slid to a halt. The lasers were back up.

"No, no, no!" He ran a hand through his already messy hair. "The circuit's looped back!"

"Doctor!" Donna shouted. "Zap it back again!"

The sound of boots hitting the cement floor echoed through the tunnel. "They're coming," Rose reminded him, her eyes on Jenny.

"I know!" he replied tersely. "The control panel's on the other side!" He studied the passage frantically, but no openings presented themselves. The only way to control the lasers was through the arming device—which was on the other side. Jenny didn't have his sonic screwdriver (nor was he confident in his ability to throw it to her without destroying it) and even if she did, she lacked his mechanical knowledge (though perhaps not a bit of his brilliance). "I can't," he began, and pulled at his hair. "I don't—there's nothing I can do," he realized. "I'm sorry, so sorry, but I can't."

Jenny took a deep breath—and then she smiled. "Guess I'll have to make do on my own, then." She raised her arms above her head like a gymnast preparing to begin a routine. "Watch and learn, father." And then she was off. She took a running start and sprang into action. Her body flowed into handstand after handstand; she was a blur of black and green and gold and she moved with a great deal more grace than the Doctor ever did.

Donna gaped as the girl navigated the maze of lasers. "No way," she breathed.

The Doctor's face was priceless, Rose thought. He looked completely and utterly stunned. His forehead wrinkled and his eyebrows jumped up as he followed her progress.

"But, that was impossible!" Donna exclaimed as Jenny executed a perfect landing.

The confusion and—could it be—concern vanished from the Doctor's face, to be replaced by a huge smile. "Not impossible," he disagreed, "just very unlikely." And then he hugged her. "Brilliant!" he crowed. "That was mad and totally brilliant!" Jenny was smiling as he lifted her off the floor and swung her around a bit. There were tears in her eyes, and Rose found that her own were a bit wet. She beamed at the girl, and when the Doctor set Jenny down Rose hugged her as well.

"You would have been a fantastic gymnast," she said.

The Doctor looked gob-smacked. "Rose Tyler, you just saw her dodge lasers and you're thinking about gymnastics?"

"Don't knock gymnastics," she replied playfully. "As I recall, they saved your life once."

He scratched his ear. "Yes, right. Well." And then he turned back to his daughter and another smile lit up his face. "You were brilliant."
She grinned back at him. "I didn't kill him, General Cobb. I could have, but I didn't." The words came out in a rush. "I chose," she said, her voice filled with wonder.

"Spread out!" Cobb's voice cut through the moment. Donna pulled Jenny around the corner, and Rose followed, but the Doctor stood where he was. The joy and mischief drained out of him and he stood just a bit taller. He cut an imposing figure in his long coat, with his eyes hard and his face set in lines that could have been carved from stone.

"I warned you, Cobb." His voice was cold and hard. "If the Source is a weapon, I will stop you. I will make sure you never use it."

"One of us is going to die today," the man responded, "and it won't be me!" Then he raised his gun and fired.

The Doctor dodged around the corner after the girls, but something made him pause. Just for a moment he felt the timelines shudder and shift. Something was coming. He'd felt it before, standing in the street with Rose after he lit the Olympic Torch in 2012.

_They keep tryin' to split us up, but they never ever will._

_Never say never ever._

_A storm is coming._

His jaw clenched. No. Not this time. He would defy the Vortex itself. She had come back to him, traversed universes and searched for years to find him again. He would not lose her.

The Doctor and Donna were leading the way down the winding passage. Rose hung back and walked with Jenny. She had tried to talk to the Doctor, but he was distracted, and he was useless when his mind was elsewhere.

"So," the girl began. "You travel with my dad, and you're together."

"That's right," Rose replied with a smile.

"Does that," she paused, embarrassed. There was a hesitancy about her that reminded Rose of the Doctor when he attempted to discuss anything remotely personal. He was confident, bordering on egotistical in most situations, but not when it came to the people he cared about. "Does that make you my mum?" she asked.

Rose didn't answer immediately. "Do you want it to?" she asked after a moment of silence.

Jenny blinked. "I—I just thought that was how it worked."

"I meant what I told the Doctor, about me an' Pete," Rose replied. "Because they say that you can't choose your family, but that's rubbish. You can't choose who is biologically related to you but that doesn't make them family." She paused. "If you want to think of me as your mum, I'd be honored, but it has to be something that you want.

Jenny was silent for a minute, clearly thinking. "I—I would like that," she said shyly.

Rose smiled. "I would too."

"Mum," Jenny said tentatively, rolling the word around in her mouth, tasting it, trying it out. She found she liked the way it sounded, liked how Rose's face lit up when she heard it. "Are you a Time
Lord too?"

The woman laughed. "Oh no, not me. I'm human, well, mostly."

"How do you mean?" She was confused, now. "Was one of your parents an alien?"

Rose shook her head. "No. Of course, some people had doubts about my mum, but that's not it. There was—an accident. Not really an accident, because I did it on purpose, but there were side effects." She shrugged. "It's a long story. I'll tell you once we get back to the TARDIS, if you're still interested."

Jenny nodded. "I want to hear about everything. There's so much he won't say."

"Don't be too hard on him, Jenny," Rose replied softly. "He's not trying to be a git, really. But—he had a family, before the Time War. He had children, and they died, and it's hard for him." She exhaled loudly, trying to vent some of her own frustration. "He internalizes everything, just pushes it aside until it builds and builds and he can't deal with it."

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Donna and the Doctor were having their own conversation. He was staring at the floor in front of them like it held the answer to the secrets of life, the universe, and everything. His forehead was crinkled and his eyebrows were drawn down into a frown of concentration.

"I know that look," Donna commented. He glanced at her, puzzled. "See it a lot round our way—blokes with pushchairs and frowns." She smiled. "You've got dad-shock."

He blinked. "Dad-shock? That's not even a word, let alone a medical condition."

Her smile widened. "Dad-shock: sudden, unexpected fatherhood. Takes a bit of getting used to. Her voice softened, turning from teasing to sincere. "I think Rose will be a wonderful Mum."

He stiffened. "That's not it." He didn't want to think about Rose and children—it was just one more thing he couldn't give her. Time Lords were sterile, had been since Pythia cursed the lot of them. It was why they moved to loom-based reproduction, well, that and it helped subsume all those petty emotions that being in a relationship brought out. Marriages on Gallifrey were political in nature, not love-based at all. His relationship with Rose would have been scandalous for its emotional and physical intimacy, let alone its composition. She was right, when she asked him if any other Time Lords would even consider doing what he had: they wouldn't. They would probably have left her to burn, never mind stooping to mate with her.

Donna would not be put off. "What is it, then? The thought of having Jenny in the TARDIS? Like you've got a sports car and she'll turn it into a people carrier?" She snorted. "I know that your lifestyle isn't exactly child friendly, but she's not a child. She can handle herself."

"I've been a father before," he said abruptly.

She gaped at him. "What?" she finally asked.

He continued to stare at the corridor ahead of them. "I had children before the War, a granddaughter, even. Then I didn't." A muscle in his jaw twitched. "I lost all of that a long time ago, along with everything else."

"I'm sorry," she said softly. "I didn't know."

"Yeah," he replied.
"You never said." There was no accusation in her voice, only confusion and concern. "Why didn't you tell me?" He didn't answer. "You talk all the time, but you never say anything."

He sighed. "I didn't tell you because it hurts, Donna. Rose traveled with me for over two years before I told her. It was just before—" his throat closed and he swallowed. "Just before I lost her."

"And she's back now," Donna pointed out.

He closed his eyes. "Yes. But when I look at Jenny I see them. The hole that they left—and the pain that filled it." When he opened his eyes again they were unreadable. The walls were up. "I don't know if I can face that every day."

"It won't stay like that." She glanced back to Rose and Jenny, who were deep in conversation. "She'll help you and Rose will help you, and it will get better."

He shook his head. "When they died, that part of me died with them." His voice was harsh and raw. "It'll never come back, not now."

"Never say never, Doctor." She unwittingly echoed his words from so long ago.

"Even if I wanted to give Rose children," he replied in that same anguished voice, "I can't. Time Lords haven't reproduced sexually in centuries—it's one more thing I can't give her. And Jenny…" He shook his head. "No. It's not happening."

Donna stared at him, and then she took a deep breath. "I'm going to tell you something that I've never told you before, Doctor." She grabbed his arm and made him look at her. "I think you're wrong."

Gunshots echoed off the cement walls. Rose and Jenny jogged forward. "They've blasted through the beams," the girl noted cheerfully. "Time to run again." She grinned. "I love the running."

The serious expression melted off of his face and he returned her grin. "Me too." Then he grabbed Rose's hand and they took off down the corridor.

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The tunnel turned into a dead-end. "We're trapped!" Donna panted.

The Doctor searched the walls. "Can't be," he called over his shoulder, "this must be the temple." One of the walls, he realized, looked strange—different from the others. He moved closer. "This is a door!" He set to work, using the sonic to bypass the security measures on the keypad next to the metal plate.

Donna stared at another metal plaque that was fastened to the wall just below the ceiling. "And again," she mused, "we're down to 1-2 now."

"I've got it!" the Doctor exclaimed.

"I can hear them," Jenny noted from her position as guard.

"Nearly there!" the Doctor replied. The gunshots were getting closer, and they could hear shouting from the direction they'd come.

"These can't be a cataloguing system," Donna continued, oblivious. "They're too similar, too familiar."

"They're nearly here," Jenny reminded them.
"Then get back here!" the Doctor ordered. She didn't move. "Rose! Get her back here!"

"Jenny, Donna," the woman barked, "come on!"

"Not yet," the girl protested.

"Now!" the Doctor snapped. "Got it!" The door slid open and they darted inside just as Cobb and his soldiers came into view.

"Close the door!" Donna yelled. The Doctor waved the sonic at the keypad set into the wall and it slid shut. He locked it for good measure. He wanted to figure out what was going on without interruption, thank you very much.

"That was close," Rose noted.

The Doctor grinned. "No fun otherwise."

They moved further into the complex and Donna voiced what they'd all been thinking. "It's not what I'd call a 'temple,'" she noted. "More like a—"

"Fusion-drive transport?" the Doctor suggested.

She huffed. "I was going to say, space ship, but yeah."

"That's because it is," he replied.

"The one that brought the original settlers?" Rose asked, frowning.

He shook his head. "Can't be. The fuel cells would have run out and the whole thing would have powered down ages ago."

A quick dash and a staircase later the Doctor was staring at a computer screen with his brainy specs perched on the bridge of his nose. Jenny shot Rose a confused look, but the woman only rolled her eyes. The Doctor and his props. She wanted to tell him that he didn't need to look any more clever than he already did, but she had to admit that he was damned sexy in spectacles.

"This is the original spaceship," he muttered. "First wave of human/Hath co-colonization of Messaline."

"Does it mention the War?" Donna asked from her position behind him.

"Final entry," he read. "Mission commander dead. Still no agreement on who should assume leadership. Hath and humans have divided into factions!" He pulled the specs off and stuffed them in his pocket.

"And if they were using those machines," Rose began.

"Exactly!" the Doctor interrupted. "They suddenly had two armies fighting a war that couldn't be won!"

"A power vacuum," she murmured. Jenny watched them, her eyes wide with excitement. She'd joked about their constant thinking earlier, but she was beginning to realize that solving a puzzle was almost as much fun as running.
Donna had stopped listening to the tale unraveling around the computer terminal. Her attention was fixed on a digital screen hovering above the door. It was another eight digit code, but this one ended in 2-4. "Look at that," she said, and pointed at the screen.

Rose blinked. "It's like the numbers in the tunnels."

"No, no no no, but—listen." Donna grinned. Everything was sliding into place in her head. "I was a temp in Hounslow library for six months, and I mastered the Dewey Decimal System in two days flat." Pride crept into her voice, but pride tempered with the knowledge that she was right. "I'm good with numbers. It's staring us in the face!"

"What is?" Jenny was confused.

Donna turned to face the rest of them. "It's the date," she replied with a smile. "Assume that the first two numbers are some big space date, and then you've got year, month, and day. It's switched around, like it is in America!"

"It's the New Byzantine Calendar!" the Doctor exclaimed. "Donna Noble, you are brilliant!"

"Supertemp," she agreed. "The codes are completion dates for each section! They finish something and then slap the date on it." She paused. "But there's more! The numbers aren't counting down—they're going out from here. The first date I saw back there was 60120717, and today's date is 60120724."

"That's seven days," Rose said after a quick mental check.

"What about seven days?" Jenny asked, still lost.

"The war has been going on for seven days." The Doctor's eyes were wide.

Jenny blinked. "But that—that's impossible! They said years."

The Doctor shook his head. "No, they said generations, and if they're all like you, then they could have had twenty generations in a single day."

"How many people have died in the past seven days?" Rose's voice was soft and sad. It was so pointless, the killing.


"But all the buildings, the encampments," she protested. "They're in ruins!"

"Not ruined," Donna disagreed. "Empty, waiting to be populated."

"They've mythologized their entire history," the Doctor said slowly. "The source must be part of that too. Come on!" He bolted for the stairwell, and they followed.

They followed their noses, which was how they ended up in the middle of a garden hidden away on the ship. They met Martha on the way, who was filthy from her journey over the surface. She assured them that she was alright but her smile didn't quite reach her eyes and her voice didn't ring true. The Doctor was about the question her more thoroughly, but the Hath arrived from one direction and the humans from another, and he found himself standing between the two warring factions. The Source that they were each so desperate to possess wasn't mystical at all—it was a third generation terraforming device.
"Stop!" he yelled, and thrust his hands out. "Hold your fire!"

"Is this a trap?" Cobb demanded, his gun aimed at the Hath, who kept their weapons out and ready.

"You said you wanted this war over," the Doctor reminded him.

"I said I wanted this war won!" the general snapped back.

The Doctor shook his head. "You can't win; no one can." He glanced behind him at the Hath. "Do you even know why you're here? Your whole history," he turned so that he could address all of them, "is just a long game of telephone! The more time passes the more distorted the truth gets!" He gestured to the terraforming device. "This is the Source!" It was beautiful, a swirling ball of color surrounded by glass and a thin metal cage. "This is what you're fighting over, a device to rejuvenate a planet's ecosystem. It's from a laboratory, not some creator. It's science, not magic. It's a bubble of gasses, a cocktail of stuff for accelerated evolution." He dropped his hands and moved around the device, speaking alternatively to the humans and the Hath. "Methane, hydrogen, ammonia, amino acids, proteins, and nucleic acids—it's all in there." He nodded at the ball. "It's used to make barren planets habitable." He smiled then. "Look around you." His eyes traveled over the forest that surrounded them. His voice changed, lost the detached tone that reminded Rose of a professor lecturing and took on the gentle tones of a friend. "It's not for killing. It's for bringing life. And if you let it, it can lift you out of these dark tunnels and into the bright, bright sunlight."

This, Jenny decided, was what she wanted to be. He stood between two armies without a weapon and he was unafraid. He spoke and they listened. He was giving them a choice, letting them see the possibility for peace, the beautiful gift that they had at their fingertips. He was showing them a way out of war. It was the only thing they'd known, but it didn't have to be that way. They could build instead of tear down, they could work together as the original colonists had intended before everything went wrong. They could transform this planet.

"No more fighting," he continued, "and no more killing." He grabbed the Source and lifted it above his head. "I'm the Doctor," he said, loudly enough so that everyone could hear him, "and I declare this war over!" He threw the ball to the ground. The glass shattered and the gasses trapped inside floated out and into the air. They were a myriad of colors—green and purple and brilliant gold. They climbed through the air, up and up and up until they wreathed against the ceiling. Something in the ship shifted and creaked and a patch of the dark sky was revealed. The gasses hung suspended for a moment, and then were sucked outside.

Weapons dropped to the ground on both sides. Hath and human alike stared at the spectacle, entranced. It was unlike anything they'd ever seen before. Jenny ran to the Doctor and hugged him. He smiled at her, fine lines around his eyes crinkling the way they did when he was really, truly happy. His eyes met Rose's and he was surprised to see that there were tears filling her eyes, but she smiled at him like she was unbelievably proud.

"What's happening?" his daughter asked. And she was his daughter. He'd tried to deny it, much like he'd originally tried to deny his feelings for Rose, but it was wrong to do so. The place in his hearts where memories of his children and Susan resided still ached, but he had been given a second chance. It would be criminal to waste it. The things he wanted to show her, the planets and peoples. Barcelona, and the Eye of Orion, and the statue of Rose that sat in the national museum in London. Woman Wept and the view of Earth from space. Maybe they could even make it to the moon this time.

"The gasses will escape," he answered, "and trigger the terraforming process."
She looked at him expectantly. "What does that mean?"

He smiled again softly. "A whole new world."

General Cobb stood still as stone while the soldiers around him watched the Source in awe. Everything that he stood for, everything that he'd worked for and devoted his life to had been stripped away by this, this Doctor.

*One of us is going to die today.*

He raised his gun and held it aimed straight at the Doctor.

Rose saw him. Her hand went for her own gun strapped to her hip, but there wasn't time. Cobb's was out and cocked he would fire before she had a chance. The movement to her side caught Jenny's attention and her eyes widened. "No!" she cried, and moved in front of the Doctor, shielding him with her body. The shot was like thunder in the sudden silence and she jerked as the bullet impacted.

The Doctor caught her as she slumped back. The soldiers around Cobb restrained him and brought him to his knees, but the Doctor's attention was focused on his daughter. Her face twisted in pain and blood welled up beneath her fingers. Martha was at his side in an instant as he eased the girl down to the floor, still cradling her. Rose crossed to stand slightly behind him. She smoothed Jenny's hair back from her forehead and tried to smile.

"Jenny?" the Doctor asked. "Jenny, talk to me, Jenny!"

Martha gently lifted the girl's hand. She paled, set it back down, an sat on her heels.

"Is she going to be alright?" Donna asked quietly. Martha bit her lip and shook her head. Silently they stood and moved back from the other three. Rose shifted so that she was kneeling opposite the Doctor. Her face was calm, but there were tears gathering in her eyes.

"A new world," Jenny whispered as she watched the gasses of the Source spiral up through the air and out into the atmosphere above them. "It's beautiful."

"Wait until you see it in a few years," the Doctor said, his voice choked. "We'll get you back to the TARDIS, fix you up, and jump ahead." She gasped. He held her tighter. "Jenny, be strong now. You have to hold on. You need to regenerate, do you hear me?" She was silent except for a few gasping breaths as tears dripped down her cheeks. "We've got things to do, you and me," he continued. "We can go anywhere, anywhen. Your choice."

She sobbed. "That sounds good."

He glanced at Rose and the look on his face almost broke her heart. His eyes were tortured, but then he looked back down at his daughter and she watched his face soften the way it did sometimes when he looked at her—when all the love she knew he felt bubbled to the surface. He cupped Jenny's face with one hand and stroked her cheek with his thumb. "You're my daughter," he told her, his voice rough. "And we've only just got started. You're going to be great," he said, the conviction in his voice allowing no argument. "You're going to be more than great—you're going to be amazing. D'you hear me, Jenny?"

She didn't have a chance to respond. Her breathing hitched, and then died off in a gurgling sigh. He felt for a pulse but there was nothing. She was gone. The Doctor clutched her to him. He pressed his lips against her forehead and stared over the top of her head, his eyes wide and wet, his breathing
ragged. He gulped in air like he was drowning as he rocked her gently. Rose moved forward and wrapped her arms around both of them. She pressed her face into his hair and he pressed his into the curve of her neck. She could feel dampness gathering, the warm wetness of his tears. A single sob escaped his lips and his whole body shuddered. She held him tighter, trying to stave off her own sorrow. He would need her now. It wasn't fair, oh god it wasn't fair! For once couldn't the universe give something back to him without taking something else away?

Then he pulled away. "Two hearts," he murmured as he locked eyes with Rose. "Two hearts. She's like me." There was hope growing in his eyes, a hope that she knew would die and desperately wished could stay. "If we wait—if we just wait…"

"There's no sign of regeneration," Martha said from her position behind them. Her face was sad, empathy for his suffering writ large. "She's like you, but maybe not enough."

His face fell. "No," he said softly. "No, too much. She's too much like me." He kissed her on the forehead, laid her gently on the ground, and stood. Anger had replaced sorrow and Donna and Martha paled when they saw his face. The Oncoming Storm had arrived. He whirled around to face Cobb, who knelt on the ground, his arms held behind his back by the soldiers he had led. His gun lay in front of him. The Doctor was beside him in three long strides. The gun felt surprisingly good in his hands. The cold metal and weight comforted him. It would take so little to end this man's life—just a squeeze of the trigger. Like pushing a button. If he stepped back he wouldn't even get any blood on his clothes.

The Doctor clicked the safety off and held the gun centimeters from Cobb's head. The soldier closed his eyes, but the shot never came. Instead, the Doctor uncocked the weapon and dropped it at his feet. He knelt so that he could meet the man's eyes. Cobb flinched away from the fury that he saw swirling there. This was no ordinary man. For just a moment the Doctor let the truth of himself shine through. The force of his stare scorched the other man.

"I never would," he said, his voice dreadfully quiet. "Have you got that? I. Never. Would." He stood and turned so that he could see human and Hath. "When you start this new world, when you build this new society," he charged them. "Build it on that—on a man who never would. Remember that!" His eyes fell on Jenny's body. "Remember her."
He would not let them bury Jenny, not right away, even though there was no sign of an impending regeneration and both her hearts had stopped. He would not let the soldiers touch her at all. When Rose suggested gently that they move her to a place that was better suited for waiting he scooped Jenny's body up and carried her, much the same way that he had carried Rose when she fell asleep in the console room or the library. He laid her on a cot tucked away in the corner of the theatre (previously, the barracks) and pulled a stool up beside it. He sat next to her, his long fingers wrapped around her hand, almost completely immobile. From where Donna was standing he hardly seemed to breathe. His face was carefully blank they way that it was when she first met him, the way that sent chills down her spine. Rose sat on his right side, her fingers threaded through his. He watched Jenny and she watched him and something moved in her eyes, something ancient and terribly sad.

The air was thick, too thick. Donna felt like she couldn't breathe with the weight of everything the Doctor had lost pressing down on her. The silence was overpowering—it crawled into her mouth and down her throat, threatening to choke her. She wanted to stay there for him, to help him keep vigil over the body of his child, but she couldn't. It was too much, and she turned and walked quickly out of the room.

Martha had left just after the Doctor sat down. She squeezed his shoulder in a show of solidarity, nodded to Rose, and moved away. Donna found her leaning against the wall just outside the theatre.

"How is he?" the young black woman asked.

Donna shrugged. "The same."

Martha sighed. "I tried, I really did but—it's too intense. You asked why I left, earlier, and that's why." She studied the ceiling. "He pulls you in like a planet's gravity and you burn up in the atmosphere before you touch the ground. This life of his is brilliant, but it's terrible too, and if you get too close it'll consume you." She sighed. "You'll feel like that too, one day. You'll wake up and realize that if you don't get out now, you'll never break out of his orbit."

The ginger woman looked thoughtful, but shook her head. "There's so much to see," she said, wonder in her voice. "I'm going to travel with them forever."

"I thought that too," Martha replied softly.

Five and a half hours later Rose and the Doctor stepped into the hallway and shut the door behind them. "We're going," he said without looking at them.

They were silent on the trip back to the TARDIS. The Doctor moved mechanically and even the ship seemed to pick up the sorrowful mood that hung over them. Their landing was smoother than normal, and when Martha opened the doors she discovered that they were not back on Earth. A vast plain stretched out in front of them, covered in grass as high as her hips that undulated in the warm
breeze. Birdsong filled the air along with the light perfume of flowers. Clouds rolled across the sky, fluffy cumulus that looked like cotton balls, and higher up brittle cirrus clouds stood between the sun and the Earth.

"It's beautiful," Donna said.

"It's Messaline," the Doctor replied. "A thousand years later. Human and Hath formed a cooperative society. They turned the progenation machines back to their original purpose." He paused. "There hasn't been a war here in all that time. They remembered how their world came into being. They chose peace."

Rose wrapped her arm through his. "She helped create this."

Everyone knew who 'she' was. The Doctor nodded. "Yes." They stood in silence for a long moment, and then he turned away. "Back to the TARDIS," he told them. "It's time to take you home, Martha Jones."

Martha's goodbyes were short and to the point. The Doctor maintained his blank façade as he hugged her and wished her well, as he sent them into the Vortex, as Rose gently detached his fingers from the console and led him through the byzantine hallways to the smooth wooden door of his room. He stayed in control as she shut the door behind them and brought him to sit on the bed, but when her arms slipped around him, when she pulled him down onto the duvet beside her and wrapped herself around him offering what could be constructed as forgiveness he broke.

He didn't deserve to be forgiven. Once again someone he loved had been killed for him. He clung to her, buried his face in the curve of her neck and she stroked his back soothingly. He wept. He hadn't cried, properly cried anyway, in such a long time. Sobs wracked his body and she held him, a point of calm in the storm of his grief.

She didn't know how long they spent lying on his bed, curled around each other in the darkness. Eventually he quieted. The wrenching sobs lessened, and finally stopped, and he lay against her just breathing. She rested her cheek against the top of his head and breathed in the scent of him. He pulled back, just enough to see her face. His eyes were red and puffy and there were tear tracks on his cheeks.

"Thank you," he said simply.

She kissed him. "Any time, Doctor." He laid his head on the pillow and she scooted down so that they were laying nose to nose. He sighed, and then yawned. "You should get some sleep," she told him, and moved to go.

He grabbed her arm. "Please," he asked hesitantly, "will you stay?"

Rose sat down on the bed and pressed her lips to his forehead. "I will."

They laid Jenny's body on a table on the stage of the theatre. A proper ceremony would help, they'd told the Doctor. Give them closure. Allow Hath and Human to heal. They wanted to pay their respects to the last casualty of a war that shouldn't have been. Flowers from the garden on board the spaceship lay around her and a thin white sheet covered most of her body.

They were certain that she was dead—even the Doctor had said so, and thus they were very surprised when a strange golden light seemed to shimmer under her skin. It grew brighter and brighter until it was blinding to look at and they turned away. When it died down Jenny was gone.
Where the slim, blonde girl had lain a strange woman sat blinking at them. She was a bit taller than Jenny had been, and although her face was similar in shape her eyes were a bright bluish green and her hair had more red than gold in it. She stretched her arms as if she had just woken from a deep sleep and cracked her neck.

"Blimey!" she said. "That was a rush!" And then she clapped her hands over her mouth as her eyes widened in shock. "What happened?" she asked after a moment. "I sound all weird!"

"Hello, sweetie." They whirled around and found themselves face to face with another strange woman. Her dirty-blonde curls framed a face that was thirty, maybe thirty-five years old, and a pair of startlingly blue eyes. Her skin was tan, almost weathered and approximately the same color as her hair. She leaned against the doorway, arms crossed, as nonchalantly as if she was standing in her own home.

"Who are you?" the girl-that-wasn't-Jenny asked.

"I'm River Song," the strange woman replied. "And you're Jenny." She smiled. "Your father sent me to find you. It seems that you've inherited your mum's jeopardy-friendly nature. I think you've set a new record for youngest regeneration."

Much to his surprise, the Doctor slept through what passed for night on the TARDIS, and late into the morning. Rose was still with him when he woke, although they'd shifted in the night and she lay on her back, one arm thrust out beside her and the other wrapped around him. His head was pillowed on her chest, and he lay half on, half off of her. She made a very good pillow, he noted, his mind still foggy with sleep. Much better than he would. She mentioned frequently that he seemed to be made up of bony angles.

He tried to move without waking her, but failed. She yawned and stretched and smiled when she saw him. "G'morning," she said, her voice fuzzy and her speech slow.

He smiled at her. "Good morning, Rose." He stood and she rolled onto her stomach. The duvet slipped down to pool around her waist and he found that he was having difficulty focusing on getting dressed. "I thought we'd visit Jack today," he said after he shrugged into his suit jacket and straightened his tie. When they were in the TARDIS he rarely wore all of his layers, but he felt the need for a buffer after recent events. His armor wasn't quite as impregnable as, oh, a leather jacket, but it would do.

She lifted her face from the pillow and blinked at him. "Really?"

"Don't you want to?" he replied.

"Well, yeah, but usually you're so—" She waved her hand vaguely. Rose Tyler was not a morning person, and it showed.

"Donna wants to meet him, the TARDIS could use a top-up, and the last time we saw him, well…" his voice trailed off.

She held up a hand to stem the flow of chatter that passed as his version of an explanation. "Doctor, it's okay. I'd love to see Jack."

"It would just be nice," he said softly, as he sat on the bed next to her, "to see that I haven't destroyed everyone that I care about."

Rose laid her head in his lap. "You didn't destroy me," she offered. He stroked her hair.
"Sometimes I wonder."

Donna was having tea in the kitchen when Rose and the Doctor finally emerged. She remained silent except for a quite "Good morning," as they made breakfast (eggs and toast, seriously, was that all he ate in the morning?). She wanted to ask Rose, but they seemed—subdued. Not that she blamed them. She was still reeling from Jenny's birth and death (she'd lived for less than twenty-four hours) and could only imagine how they felt.

"So, Donna Noble," the Doctor said after he cleaned his plate and part of Rose's. "Do you fancy meeting Captain Jack?"

She blinked. Of course, she hadn't really expected him to bring up what happened yesterday, but his offer seemed like such a non-sequitur. Didn't he need some time to mourn? After Lance's death she'd moped for a week, and she didn't even like the man when she found out what he'd been up to! And then she remembered how they had met the first time. He'd been standing in the TARDIS, crying, although she hadn't realized it at the time. Then she'd been beamed aboard or whatever and he'd been off and running. Oh, there'd been some pretty obvious hints that he'd lost someone important (Rose), but he seemed happiest solving puzzles and running for his life. She thought she understood, then, why he was always on the go. It was a distraction, something he could do to not think about everything that he'd lost. She glanced at Rose and received all the confirmation she needed in a tiny nod from the other woman.

Donna smiled. "Sure, why not? Think it's time I saw whether the man lives up to all the hype I've been hearing."

The Doctor grabbed his and Rose's plates and deposited them in the sink. "Next stop, Cardiff!" he proclaimed with a manic grin.

"Oi, spaceman!" Donna yelled as the TARDIS jostled again. "Get your head out of the clouds and fly this ship!"

The Doctor was whirling around the console like a madman, well, like more of a madman than usual. The TARDIS shook and listed and Rose held on to the jump seat. "I am, Donna!" he replied. "What are you doing?" he asked his magnificent ship. She hummed apologetically, but continued to shiver and shake.

"She's not going off on her own again, is she?" Donna demanded.

"No, no!" the Doctor spared a moment to roll his eyes at her. "That was a paradox, Donna. Jenny being in danger pulled the TARDIS to Messaline, but she got there too early, thus causing Jenny's creation. This is something else."

Rose reached out and put a hand on the wall behind her. "What is it?" she asked the TARDIS. Her only reply was a vague feeling of wrongness. "I think something's happening, Doctor," she said. The feeling spread over her body, like ants were crawling on her skin.

"Almost there!" He got in a few strategically placed whacks with the rubber mallet that hung from the console, and then the TARDIS shuddered and stopped. Donna sighed with relief and picked herself up from the floor. Rose uncurled from the jump-seat, and the Doctor threw open the doors. "I give you, Cardiff!" he proclaimed grandly.

Rose was the first out. The smile drained from her face as she took in the scene before her. The
Millenium plaza was in disarray. Police cordons cut off most of the area and it was unusually deserted. Her eyes, however, were fixed on the hub. It was gone. In its place was a heap of rubble. Chunks of rock and steel radiated out from the former site of Torchwood three.

"Doctor!" she yelled, her face pale.

"What?" He stuck his head out of the TARDIS and followed the line of Rose's shaking arm as she indicated the destruction around them. "Oh," he said, his eyes wide."

"What is it?" Donna finally joined them and gasped. "It's not supposed to look like that, I take it?"

"Where's Jack, Doctor?" Rose asked, ignoring the ginger woman's remark.

After he recovered from his initial shock the Doctor's lips pulled into a thin slash across his face and his brows lowered. His eyes were dark and dangerous. "This isn't right," he said softly. "This isn't right at all."
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

Quotes taken from Torchwood, 'Children of Earth.' Also a bit of 'The Hollow Men' by T.S. Eliot.

This is the way the world ends.
This is the way the world ends.
This is the way the world ends.
Not with a bang but a whimper.

Despite the snide remarks that Owen seemed to find mandatory, Ianto Jones was not stupid. Nor was he employed at Torchwood solely to look good in a suit, as Jack Harkness often jokingly implied. He was there largely due to his tenacity and his ability to catch wayward pteradons, but he had been an agent at the now-defunct Torchwood One for years. He was efficient, intelligent, hard working, and discreet. He was also in love with his boss.

It was easy to love Jack Harkness. The man was beautiful, in a purely masculine sense, and dead charming when he wanted to be. It was, however, difficult to know him. He could be laughing and brilliant and ruthless and at times terribly, terribly sad. There were shadows behind his eyes that spoke of old wounds and buried pain.

Ianto Jones was nothing if not practical, and he was far too worldly to believe that he was Jack's first love. The man was centuries, perhaps millennia old, after all. They'd met one of his former lovers when they investigated a series of strange deaths centering on a girl, but then, Jack Harkness was not his first love. He'd been engaged before to another operative, a woman named Lisa—a woman he'd loved totally, enough to hide her beneath Torchwood itself when she was partially converted to a cyberman during the Battle of Canary Wharf.

Ianto was prepared to hear about Jack's previous lovers. After all, he found that talking a bit about Lisa—little things like funny anecdotes or short stories—helped the ache in his chest to recede. Jack had obliged him, told him stories (most of which ended with Jack naked) and little snippets of information about who he was and where he was from.

And then the Earth had been ripped from its orbit and Ianto met them. Well, not met, exactly, more like saw their faces on a computer screen—but he also saw Jack's reaction. There was relief and a little anger, but beneath that a deep, bubbling joy unlike anything he'd ever seen before. Even going to what could very well have been his destruction Jack looked—lighter. Because of the Doctor—the Doctor—and a woman named Rose. Ianto was prepared for a great many things, but he wasn't prepared for the silence that surrounded those two. When he returned Jack said little, only mentioned that they sorted it. Gwen asked about them, and he replied with a hint of a smile that they would meet again.

Jack Harkness knew the alien responsible for the creation of the Torchwood Institute and Ianto had never guessed. It was—unnerving. He'd always been a bit suspicious of Torchwood's obsession with
the Doctor. According to UNIT the alien solved more crisis than he created and Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart appeared to trust him implicitly. Donna did too, which went a long way towards easing Ianto's mind. Besides Jack, Donna Noble was probably Ianto's favorite person. They were both frighteningly organized and he had a feeling that if he hadn't taken on more of an active role in Torchwood they would be competing over who could be the best office manager. As it was, he was frequently in the field and she preferred to stay indoors.

Donna said that they could trust the Doctor. Donna said he was coming. Ianto hoped for all their sakes that she was right.

Jack sat with his back against the wall of the warehouse, his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. They had Alice and Steven—his daughter and his grandson. They would kill them if he revealed their plan and the events of so many years ago. He cursed Frobisher. Of all the blind, stupid things to do, he was intent on destroying the one chance that humanity had to beat these things.

No one knew what the aliens actually were. They were referred to as the '456,' the frequency on which their first communications had been broadcast. No one knew that they'd been to Great Britain before, and if the government had its way no one would. Didn't they understand? The aliens had promised they wouldn't return and here they were again. They couldn't be trusted. He wanted to hit the wall, to hit something. Anything was better than just waiting.

Gwen and Ianto watched him covertly. Rhys was snoring on the couch. He wanted to do what the Doctor always did, smile and shrug and put them off with a casual 'I'm always alright,' but they knew him too well for that. Of course, he'd known the Doctor was lying through his teeth, but that didn't stop the alien from trying.

A wind from nowhere upset the stack of papers on the floor and whipped Gwen's hair around her face. A harsh, grinding moan echoed off of the warehouse walls and Jack shot to his feet. A tall, familiar blue shape was materializing in the middle of the vast empty space. Gwen and Rhys (no one could sleep through the TARDIS materializing nearby, not even him) were staring at it, wide-eyed. Ianto was watching with a kind of apprehensive curiosity. Jack moved to stand in front of the door, and waited.

As soon as the TARDIS was fully materialized the door opened and a blond blur barreled into him. He grunted as Rose Tyler wrapped her arms around him in a back-breaking hug. He stood stiffly for a moment but then a shudder seemed to pass through his whole body and he enveloped her in a hug of his own.

The door swung open again and Donna Noble stepped out. Ianto almost went to her, but held back at the last moment. This wasn't the Donna he knew, not yet anyway. Time travel was enough to give anyone a headache, he thought, and especially now. But then he stepped into the room and Ianto was having trouble remembering to breathe.

The last time that Ianto Jones had seen the Doctor he'd been—happy. They had just managed to contact him and he'd been absolutely thrilled, called them all brilliant and nattered on for a moment about how his companions always managed to surprise him. He'd worn this huge, goofy grin and fairly bubbled with enthusiasm.

He was not smiling now. He let the door of the TARDIS swing shut behind him and his long brown overcoat swirled about him in the last gust of the strange wind. He scanned the warehouse, noted exits and possible escape routes. His eyes rested first on Gwen, who shifted as if she wanted to step backwards, but caught herself, then on Rhys, who paled slightly but managed to stare mulishly back, and finally on Ianto. The sheer force of the alien's presence was staggering. His eyes burned with an
intensity that was decidedly inhuman, and perhaps just a touch mad. Was he always like this? How
did Jack stand it? For that matter, how did Donna and this 'Rose?'

The Doctor moved past Donna, who was introducing herself to Gwen and Rhys, and laid on hand
on Jack's shoulder. He raised his head from Rose's neck and looked at the alien with haunted eyes.

"Jack," the Doctor said, the gentleness of his voice at odds with the tension leeching from his body.
"What happened?"

Meeting a friend before they knew you was disconcerting, Gwen thought as Donna introduced
herself. Because she knew Donna. She and Rhys had been to the other woman's wedding. Hell,
Rhys had stood up for Lee, who had no family in the 21st century. But here she was, a year after
they'd met, with no idea who any of them were. She had to keep reminding herself not to mention
Lee, or the wedding, or the honeymoon, or the fact that both of them worked for Torchwood.

Even more disconcerting was the man, alien, Donna and Jack referred to as 'the Doctor.' The
problem was, she decided, that he looked entirely too human—until you met his eyes. Then, it
seemed the full force of his personality was let loose and she felt the need to put some distance
between the two of them. He was dangerous, probably more dangerous than anything they'd ever
faced before (Abaddon included), but he had put the Earth back in orbit and he was friends with
Jack, so her sidearm remained in its holster.

Donna was feeling more than a little out of her depth. Gwen and Rhys seemed nice, if quiet, but
something traumatic had clearly happened. The man who had to be Captain Jack was clinging to
Rose for dear life and that went entirely counter to what she'd heard about him. Ianto introduced
himself briefly, but seemed uncomfortable around her for some reason. Actually, they all did. She
frowned. This whole situation was starting to get on her nerves.

Jack took a deep breath and nodded. He released Rose and reached out for Ianto's hand. They
moved to the couch, recently vacated by Rhys, who stood behind it with Gwen. The Doctor and
Rose let Ianto and Jack sit. They stood with Donna in front of the couch with their backs to the
burning garbage can that served as a heater for the vast space—not that the warmth spread very far
from the source.

His hand wrapped securely around his lover's, Jack Harkness began to speak. He told them about the
456, how they originally contacted the government of Great Britain in the nineteen-sixties, how they
offered a cure for a new pandemic flu, how the only payment they wished was twelve children—and
how he was largely responsible for surrendering the children to them. His team stared at him in
shock.

"You, you just handed them over?" Gwen asked, her eyes wide.

"Yes," he said quietly, unable to meet her eyes.

"Why?" she asked after a long moment. It didn't make any sense. She'd worked with Jack for two
years and she couldn't imagine him doing something so wrong. "They were children, for Christ's
sake!"

"I know." He released Ianto's hand and covered his face. "God, I know, Gwen." Rose and the
Doctor remained silent, waiting for him to continue. "I'm not—I haven't always been the person I am
now." He chuckled darkly. "This whole hero bit is pretty recent, actually. I'd been working for
Torchwood for sixty-six years, waiting for a version of the Doctor that was in the right timeline, and I was tired." He let his hands fall to his lap and stared at them. "I didn't know why the aliens wanted the kids—didn't want to know anything about it. I just wanted to get the job done and go drink until I didn't remember."

"When did you start caring again?" the Doctor asked quietly.

Jack was silent for a moment. "November of nineteen ninety-one. I was in London for a job and I swung by the Powell estate on a whim, and I saw you and Jackie," he said to Rose with a small smile. "You were four years old. I didn't say hi or anything like that, timelines and all, but it made me think. You would be ashamed of the person I'd become." He smiled bitterly. "God knows I am."

"Oh, Jack," she murmured, and hugged him again. "I'm sorry."

He shook his head. "Don't be. You did what you did out of love. And how much of a compliment is that?" A bit of his usual swagger returned. "You decided that the universe wasn't complete without me in it."

She hit his arm playfully. "Don't go getting a big head now, although..." She glanced around the empty warehouse. "Probably enough room here for you and the Doctor."

"Rude, Rose Tyler," the Doctor chastised, and then turned back to Jack. "What about now? How did this start?"

He told them about his team, how Tosh and Owen died (in Owen's case, twice), how they were looking for replacements, how he thought they'd found another doctor but the man turned out to be a spy, a government plant. When he mentioned the bomb that destroyed the Hub Rose held up a hand.

"Let me get this straight," she said slowly. "They killed you, and then while you were dead they opened you up and put a bomb inside you, and then they closed you up and waited for you to come back and carry that bomb into the Hub before they detonated it."

He nodded. She was shaking, he noted with surprise. He didn't think he'd ever seen Rose so angry before. Her eyes were blazing and her face was set and she was almost incandescent with rage. It was a cliché, he knew, but damn she was hot when she was mad. He was starting to feel a bit more like his old self, if he could have lewd thoughts while talking about being blown up.

The Doctor did not look happy. "And why, pray tell, would they do this?" he asked, his voice dangerously quiet.

"No witnesses," Jack replied with a shrug.

"They were willing to kill two—no, three—innocent people just to keep you from talking?" he asked.

Jack nodded. "Will you help us?" He looked up at them with pleading eyes. "We've got some of the software from Torchwood, and some equipment, but it's the four of us against a government that's out for our blood." He exhaled loudly. "I don't like those odds. And," he added. "They've got Alice and Stephen—my daughter and my grandson. I threatened to blow this thing wide open, but if I make a move Frobisher—our former liaison with the government—will have them killed."

"Of course we'll help," the Doctor said.

"When was the last time you ate," Rose asked as she glanced around at them. They looked tired and pale in the flickering light of the trashcan fire.
Jack paused, considering. "I—I'm not sure."

Rose nodded sharply. "That settles it. Into the TARDIS. We could all use a hot meal, I think, to help us plan."

Gwen stopped just inside the doors of the TARDIS and stared. She'd been expecting something futuristic, something with lots of shiny metal and glass, but it looked—organic, almost, like coral. And then there was the slight detail that it was completely and totally impossible for a room that big to be in a box the size of a Police Public Call box. "It's bigger on the inside," she whispered in awe.

The Doctor grinned as he flung his coat over the railing. Rose shook her head, picked the coat up, and hung it on the coat rack. "It is indeed!" he replied brightly. "Now, it'll be probably an hour before we're ready to eat, so why don't you all take a bit of a kip? Haven't had much time to sleep, I daresay." They nodded. "Go straight down that hall," he pointed at a door that hadn't existed a moment ago, "and the rooms on the right side will be empty bedrooms. Jack, you know where your room is." He glared at the man in mock warning. "And don't let me find you in anyone's room but your own, Captain Jack Harkness! We'll be in the kitchen, second right, third left, fifth door on the right—the one with the yellow sun on the door—if you need anything."

There were indeed bedrooms down the hallway, although Gwen was a little nervous about taking one. She felt a presence in the air, like eyes watching her even when there was no one in the room besides her and Rhys. Her husband, of course, had no such feeling and promptly fell asleep. Perhaps a drink of water would help, she thought, and made her way down the hall around the corner, and to the door with the yellow sun painted on it.

It swung open before she could touch it and she jumped, startled. Motion sensors? Automatic doors? She shook her head. It was a strange, strange ship full of strange people—aliens—whatever. She was too tired to be properly amazed at anything now, but a strange kind of nervous energy made her jumpy. Gwen almost stepped into the room, but paused when she caught sight of their hosts. The Doctor was standing by the counter next to the sink with his arms around Rose and his lips pressed against her hair. She was tense and she held him with a fierceness that spoke of incredible distress.

"M so angry," she murmured into his shirt. The suit jacket was gone, presumably so it wouldn't get soiled from cooking. "I can't believe they'd do that." She paused. "That's not true. I can."

"There is only one way in which one can endure man's inhumanity to man and that is to try, in one's own life, to exemplify man's humanity to man," he replied softly. "Alan Paton."

"I want to hurt them," she confessed. "I want to find them and make them pay for what they've done."

"It's only natural," he said after a while. "They hurt someone you care about."

She was silent for a long moment and leaned into him, taking comfort from his presence. "We're going to stop them, right?"

He pressed a kiss to her hair. "Always." Then he stepped back and rolled his sleeves up to his elbows. "Now, the chicken won't chop itself. I was thinking stir-fry," he said, matter-of-factly.

Rose nodded. "Sounds good to me. I'll start on the veggies."

Gwen watched them for a moment longer. They moved together they way that she and Rhys did sometimes, when they were having a good day. Their actions seemed unconscious, but tempered
with an acute awareness of the other person's location and motions. It was so, so *domestic*. Two people cooking in a ship that was bigger on the inside and traveled through time and space, one of whom was an alien and probably the closest thing to a god she'd ever meet.

This is my life, she thought, and made her way back to the room where Rhys was. Suddenly sleep sounded very attractive.
Dinner was a simple affair: stir fry, rice, and little spring rolls that came from a planet three galaxies away. Gwen picked one up, but was hesitant to try it. She'd just found out about the baby, just told Rhys, and she wasn't even sure if she wanted to keep it—but she didn't want to harm it, not yet.

When she raised her eyes from the morsel the Doctor was watching her with faint amusement. "It's safe," he told her. "Won't hurt the baby."

Gwen blinked and Rhys frowned. "Who told you?" she asked. "Was it Jack?"

The alien looked smug. "Superior Time Lord physiology. Human women give off a very specific blend of hormones when they're pregnant." He shrugged. "I have a very sensitive nose." He paused. "Very sensitive everything, actually, especially in this body."

"Yeah, your cooking's improved significantly," Jack commented.

"You're pregnant?" Rose asked.

Gwen nodded. "Just found out. That's what saved us, actually. I was scanning m'self and Jack accidentally got in the way." She reached for Rhys's hand under the table and held it tightly.

They ate in silence for the remainder of the meal, seemingly lost in their own thoughts. Donna offered to wash the dishes after they were finished, as Rose and the Doctor cooked, and Jack and Ianto helped dry. Gwen couldn't sit still. It felt wrong, being safe and sound and eating and sleeping while there were people out there looking to kill them, people who had Jack's family. She paced restlessly while the Doctor examined some kind of display screen attached to the control console. It was covered in circles and lines that meant nothing to her, but presumably told him about whatever was happening outside.

"Can you stop that?" he asked, a hint of irritation bleeding into his voice. "It's very distracting."

"We should be out there doing something," she replied.

He sighed and turned to face them. "I know it's frustrating, Gwen, but we have no idea what we're dealing with. We need information and we need to plan. It won't do anyone any good for you to go off half-cocked and get killed."

She was about to comeback with something witty, like 'it doesn't matter how much we plan, someone's probably going to die anyway,' but Rose walked through one of the doors-that-weren't-always-there and cut the current conversation short. "Found them!" She held up her hand, grinning.

"Brilliant!" the Doctor exclaimed. She deposited her treasure in his open palm and Gwen and Rhys drew near. Seven grayish blobs about the size of a pound coin sat in his hand.
"What's that?" Rhys asked.

"These," the Doctor replied, still grinning, "are communicators." He pulled out a long, thin tube with a blue light on the end—sonic screwdriver, Rose had called it—and turned it on the blobs. A sharp whine cut through the air for a moment, and then he pocketed the device and handed each of them a blob. "Put them in your ear. They're linked so we'll all hear you when you speak." He stared at them severely. "Remember that, if you've got the sudden need to flirt. The things I've heard Jack say—" He shuddered. "They can't be un-heard."

"Someone mention me?" The man in question entered the console room, followed by Ianto and Donna.

"The Doctor was just reminiscing fondly about all of our experiences with these little buggers," Rose said with a sly smile.

"Fondly," the Doctor remarked dryly. "That's precisely the word. Now!" He brought his hands together sharply after Rose gave the others their earpieces. "First, we need information. We need to know what we're dealing with, besides a paranoid government that has no problem with assassinating its own protectors to save face."

Gwen raised her hand. "There's still one person in the government who's talking to us. Her name is Lois Habiba and she's a PA in Frobisher's office."

"Someone on the inside," Rose noted. "Very helpful. She might be able to get a look at those aliens."

"She can do more than that," Rhys put in. "She helped us get Jack out, practically planned the attempt herself." He leaned back and put his hands behind his head. "Bloody brilliant, it was."

"Well, yeah," Donna said, as if they were all incredibly thick. "She's a personal assistant, it's her job to plan things." She grinned. "Never underestimate a good PA. They're not quite at the level of supertemp, but they're close."

"She's risked her job once for us," Gwen took control of the conversation again. "She's sympathetic, doesn't trust Frobisher or the rest of the government. She might be willing to go undercover."

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. "Undercover, how?"

Gwen held up a small blue and white case. "This aren't just contact lenses, they're Torchwood contact lenses."

Ianto spoke up. "The Eye-5 software is still on the Torchwood server. The lenses look and function like regular contacts, but can transmit whatever the wearer is seeing via wireless link, if the correct software is available."

"That covers video," the Doctor commented, "but not audio. It would be best if we had both."

"There's lip-reading software that goes with it," Jack replied. "We've used it before, with Martha, actually. There's a couple seconds of delay, and it works best when the person is directly facing the camera, but it works."

"We just ran into her a couple days ago," Donna noted. "Well, more like a year ago from your perspective." She frowned. "Blimey, time travel isn't half confusing."

Rose nodded. "You get used to it. Took me about a year to wrap my head around the concept, but the most important thing to remember is that time is relative."
The Doctor stood. "I think," he said slowly, "you should meet with Miss Habiba, Gwen. If she can find out where Alice and Steven are being kept we can go there in the TARDIS, but make sure she can do it safely. We might need her again."

Lois Habiba was standing in line at a chippy when her phone rang. She frowned. The number was blocked. She shrugged and flipped it open. Worst case it was a solicitor and she hung up.

"Hello?"

"Hello Lois," the voice on the other end said. She jumped. It was the woman—Gwen.

"How did you get this number?" she hissed.

"I've got a friend who's good with phones," Gwen replied. "Look to your right." She did. The other woman was standing outside the chippy, waving at her. "Don't hang up! I need five minutes, just five minutes, Lois."

"I already helped you once," the girl said as they sat at a table in the corner of the chippy. "That's got to be enough. If anyone finds out what I'm doing it's treason. It's literally treason. Offenses like this can be tried without a jury!" Her eyes widened as her own words sunk in. "They could do anything to me!"

"I know." Gwen kept her voice low and her expression sympathetic. Part of her wanted to shake the girl. Something was happening, something big, and they needed this girl. But that's it—she was a girl, just a girl. She wasn't used to this life, not like Gwen and Ianto and Jack. She wasn't used to risking her life or her future for strangers.

Rose moved to the table, a package of chips in her hand. "You don't mind if I sit here, do you?" she asked brightly. "Nah, didn't think you would." She slid into the third seat and popped a chip into her mouth. She closed her eyes, chewed, and sighed. "That's just gorgeous. You really don't want to know how long it's been since I've had proper chips."

Lois stared at her. "Who the hell is this?" she demanded, her voice low and her eyes wide.

"I'm Rose Tyler," the woman responded. "I'd like to thank you for helping Gwen and Rhys and Ianto get Jack out." The playfulness was gone from her voice. "He's a very good friend of mine, and it means a lot to me that you helped him."

Lois shrugged. "Couldn't just leave him there and let them do whatever they were gonna do," she mumbled.

Rose leaned forward. "But you could have, Lois. You could have followed orders and stayed safe and happy in your normal life, with your beans on toast and telly, but you didn't." She eased back in her chair and sighed. "I know it's scary. Really, I do. You've got a good job with a future, and then some people show up and ask you to risk it all while simultaneously exposing a whole different world. I'm not going to tell you that you're safe, that we can protect you, because that's a lie. There are dangers, but without you we're stuck."

"You've got the information and you've got Jack back," Lois argued. "Torchwood is supposed to be able to deal with aliens! And they've got friends, too, apparently."

"We're four people, Lois," Gwen replied gently. "Seven, with Rose, the Doctor, and Donna, and we're not just fighting these aliens, but also a government that wants to cover up its previous involvement with them."
"We can't even make a move right now," Rose continued. "Because your boss—Frobisher—has Jack's family. He's got Alice, Jack's daughter, and Steven, his grandson, and if we try and do just about anything they're going to be killed."

Lois stared at them. "You—you can't—that's not true."

"I'm afraid it is." Rose's voice was soft and very sad. "There's two innocent people who are going to die for no other reason than that they're related to Jack Harkness."

"Why would they do that?" the girl asked them. She frowned like the Doctor did when he was contemplating a particularly difficult repair job on the TARDIS.

Rose shrugged. "Because they believe they're doing the right thing, and that's what makes them dangerous." She paused. "Do you remember the battle of Canary Wharf?" Lois nodded. "The people behind that—incident—believed that what they were doing was genuinely beneficial. The Doctor warned them over and over but they wouldn't listen, not until their plans were in shambles and Cybermen and Daleks were everywhere."

"What do you want me to do?" the girl asked hesitantly.

"We need information," Gwen replied. "We need to know where Alice and Steven are being kept, and we need you to wear these." She held out the blue and white plastic container.

Lois blinked. "Contact lenses?"

"Torchwood contact lenses," Gwen corrected. "They relay whatever you're seeing back to our computers and we've got lip reading software that allows us to understand what people are saying."

"You're asking me to spy on my own country." It was not a question.

"We're asking you to potentially help save thousands of lives," Gwen corrected. "You wouldn't be on your own—we could send messages to you through the lenses. You see the text like it's written on the wall." She pressed the case into Lois's open hand. "If you wear these, we can find out what's going on and then we can help."

For a moment it looked like the girl was convinced—but then she shook her head. "I can't. What if they scan for bugs?"

"They will," Gwen responded promptly, "but these won't show up."

She shook her head again. "I can't, though. Giving you information is one thing, but this—no. You're putting me right on the front line."

"I'm sorry," Rose said quietly. "I really am, and if there was another way we'd take it, but you're the only friend we have left on the inside."

"And you said that they're building something in Thames house," Gwen reminded her.

"Even if I get into Thames house," Lois protested, "I can't get onto floor thirteen! That's where they're building this thing, but Frobisher only takes Mrs. Spears with him. I'm just the office girl."

"Yeah?" Rose asked. "An' I was just a shopgirl, once."

Lois stood. "I'm sorry, but I can't. I have to go now." She moved to put the case back on the table, but Gwen closed her fingers around it.
"Take it," the Welsh woman implored. "Please, just take it and think about what we said." The girl frowned, but slipped the case into her pocket before she fled the store.

"Just out of curiosity," Gwen asked as she and Rose walked back to their hideout, "how long has it been since you've had chips?"

Rose kept her eyes on the people around them. She was scanning for any sign that they were being watched, for anything that looked out of place. "Oh, a hundred and eighty-three years, give or take a few months."

Gwen stared at her. "That's impossible!" she insisted.

Rose smiled. "I like impossible, although I think I like chips more."

Jack and Ianto were clustered around one set of monitors while Donna supervised another. All three of them were searching the TARDIS's databanks for aliens that matched the characteristics they'd been able to deduce—psychic or possessing technology capable of psychic transmission (their manipulation of the Earth's children demonstrated those abilities), long-lived, advanced (they'd offered a cure for a pandemic level disease in their first encounter with the British government), and either incapable of speech or incapable of learning English (although they apparently had software that could translate and formulate human speech adequately).

Unsurprisingly they were left with several thousand races. Weeding through them would be impossible without more information. Jack sighed and pushed himself back from the desk. "Frobisher is the key to this," he muttered. "The man is a civil servant—what makes him start ordering executions?"

Ianto paused. "What was it like?" he asked finally.

"What?" Jack replied absently.

"Being blown up."

Jack pursed his mouth. "Wasn't the best of days."

"I mean," the Welshman continued. "Did you feel it all, or did everything just go black?"

Jack was silent for a long moment. "I felt it."

"Shit."

"Yeah."

They redirected their attention back to the computer screens, but the machines stubbornly insisted on showing them the same information that they'd been displaying for the past ten minutes. "Do you ever think that one day your luck will run out?" Ianto asked after a while. "That you won't come back?"

Jack turned to face him. "I'm a fixed point in time and space," he said evenly. He held Ianto's gaze with eyes that were very old in his handsome face. "That's what the Doctor says, so no. I think it will be forever."

"And this has something to do with Rose," Ianto continued.
Jack took a deep breath and let it out noisily. "It has everything to do with her. She's the reason I can't die." There are stars collapsing and supernovas exploding and planets being born and light and matter being spun from the nothingness in her eyes and he can feel it all around him—the pulse of the universe. She is beautiful and terrible. She holds life and death in the palm of her hands and when she speaks Time itself bends to her will. "She absorbed the Time Vortex—the raw energy of the space-time continuum, and she brought me back to life. She didn't want the universe to be without me." He cracked a grin. "I choose to take it as a compliment."

"Oh." He frowned. "So one day you'll see me die, of old age, hopefully, and you'll just—keep going."

"Yeah." Jack's voice was soft, pained.

The corner of Ianto's mouth twisted up into a half-smile. "We'd better make the most of it, then."

"I suppose," Jack replied and turned back to his machine.

"Like right now?"

He paused. "Ianto, the world could be ending."

The other man smiled softly. "The world's always ending." He stretched out a hand and stroked the sleeve of Jack's World War II era trench coat where it hung from the back of Jack's chair. "And I have missed this coat."

"Oh, go on you two," Donna finally said from across the room. Ianto jumped. He'd gone and forgotten that she was in the room. She was watching them with an amused smile on her face—really, it was better than telly, the two of them. "I can hold the Doctor off for thirty minutes, and anyway, I'm sure himself understands the benefits of an 'end of the world' shag."

Jack blinked. "Donna Noble, did you just say what I think you said?"

She snorted. "If you think I just said that I'm the only one not getting any on this ship, then yes, I did."

He grinned. "I could kiss you, I really could. Wait a minute, hold that thought." He turned to the man beside him. "Ianto, remind me next time I see John Benton that he owes me ten quid!" Lightning fast he spun back to face Donna. "Do you have any idea how long I've been waiting to hear that?"

She held out a hand. "Oi! Watch yourself, loverboy," she teased. "Now run along and make the most of it!"

Jack smiled a very different smile, a slow spread of lips that hinted at lascivious things to come. "I intend to," he murmured as he grabbed Ianto's hand and ran for one of the corridors.

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Donna's monitor beeped and she tore her eyes away from the retreating couple. Jack and Ianto had been attempting to discover what race of alien they were dealing with. She had been tracking a man named Clem MacDonald who, according to Gwen, was one of the children originally offered to the 456. He had escaped, no one really knew how or why, and had been living in an institution for years under the name Timothy White. Somehow he remained connected to the 456. When all of Earth's children warned of their approach, Clem joined in. The Doctor had babbled on about psychic receptors and damaged links, but Donna couldn't follow most of it and it didn't seem like he needed her to understand. He needed her to sit there and let him babble so he could work out whatever was going on.
They needed to find Clem and bring him back to the TARDIS, where he would be safe. The Doctor thought that if he could examine Clem's memories he might get a better idea of what they were dealing with. Aliens that took children—the thought sent a shiver down her spine. She pulled out her phone and dialed Rose.

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Rose snapped her phone shut and slipped it back into her pocket. Gwen was watching her expectantly. "That was Donna," she explained. "She said that Clem MacDonald is in jail. He was picked up for theft and minor affray in Camden." Rose grinned at the Welsh woman. "Fancy a bit of a con?"

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Mrs. Spears was shoving stuffed manila folders into a large carrying case. Lois glanced up from her computer. She had the information she needed about Alice and Steven Carter, Jack's apparent daughter and grandson. She'd overheard Frobisher talking to someone on the phone, someone military, probably, about base where they were held, and once she had the name it was simple enough to access the plans and transfer them to a flash drive. She didn't know why she was doing this. She had a good job and a good life and if she was caught, well, an extended prison sentence was the best she could hope for. But something in their eyes—Gwen and that woman Rose's—gives her pause, tells her that it was worth the risks. What kind of a government kidnapped innocent people to ensure someone's good behavior? What kind of a government was more interested with preserving its reputation than the safety of its citizens?

"Mr. Frobisher asked me to come to Thames house," she said. Her voice was level and casual, a fact she was proud of, considering how her hands were shaking.

Mrs. Spears stopped transferring files and looked straight at her. "When was that?" she asked.

Lois shrugged. "He said he wanted me—at his side."

"What for?" the older woman was studying her intently. "Why on Earth would he need you?" she continued, her voice dripping condescension.

"It was a—private, conversation," Lois replied.

Mrs. Spears stiffened. "You're not the first," she hissed. "Don't think you're the first."

"I can come then?"

The older woman sniffed. "Apparently so."

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Rose, Gwen, and the newly released Clement MacDonald were driving back to their temporary base of operations when Clem started pointing. Gwen waved a hand in front of his face, but he remained still, eyes wide and unseeing.

"What's going on?" Rose asked.

Gwen shook her head. "I don't know, but it's got to be those aliens."

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Rhiannon Davies, Ianto's sister, was up to her neck in children. The schools were closed until further notice, whenever that was, but people still needed to work. It was her husband's idea, watching the children for ten quid a head. The money would be nice but he wasn't at home with twenty rambunctious kids. She was standing at the sink, scrubbing a grass-stained top, when all chatter
ceased. She turned around, the hairs on her neck standing straight up.

The children were pointing and staring. The house was silent.

Donna's computer 'dinged' again. Her eyes widened. "Doctor!" she yelled. "Doctor, it's happening again!"

He poked his head in the room. "What is it, what are they saying?"

"They're not saying anything," she replied. "They're pointing. The children in America are pointing East, and the children in Europe are pointing West."

He was silent for a moment. "England," he said after a while. "They're pointing at England." Then he was off. "Come on, Donna!" he yelled as he bolted for the console room.

"Oi! Hold your horses, spaceman!" she replied. She followed him down the twisting hallway and out of the TARDIS, up a rather rickety flight of stairs and onto the roof.

Rhiannon followed the direction of the children's fingers. "London," she murmured, her eyes wide and frightened. "They're pointing at London."

A low roar filled the air and the ground shook. Donna grabbed onto the rail and the Doctor staggered slightly, but managed to remain upright. Above them thick clouds swirled and boiled and then split. A pillar of fire descended from the sky and rested on a building in the center of the city.

"It's got to be Thames house," he shouted. "That's where Gwen's contact—Lois—said they're building something."

Donna only nodded. She'd been to other planets and seen fantastic things, but this—this was something out of the bible, for pity's sake! Pillars of fire, indeed!

And then the noise was gone and the Earth was still.

As one the children dropped their hands and opened their mouths. "We are here," they said, and then it was like a spell was broken and they were back to being children, just children, and not messengers of doom. Rhiannon leaned against the counter. Her heart felt like it was going to burst from her chest. "Whatever it is, Ianto," she said softly. "I hope you sort it soon. Parents shouldn't be afraid of their children."
Clement MacDonald leaned in close to Rose and breathed deeply. She twitched a bit but didn't jump, and Gwen had to admire her control. She'd been a little creeped out when the man had sniffed her and then proclaimed that she was pregnant. His sense of smell was frighteningly acute, somewhat akin to the Doctor's. It was disconcerting to think that someone could find out such a private bit of information simply by using his nose.

"You smell—odd," the man informed her. "Not wrong, just strange." He paused. "You're not human."

"Not entirely, no," Rose replied, her voice calm and casual. She sounded for all the world like they were talking about the weather.

"And your husband," he continued. "He's not human either."

That made Rose blink and Gwen's eyebrows rocket towards her hairline. "You mean the Doctor? He's not—that is—we're not married," Rose replied, a bit flustered. "But yes, he is an alien, completely alien, but he's not like the 456, the things that tried to take you." Her voice softened. "We're trying to help, Clem. We want to stop them. The Doctor's good at that."

The warehouse appeared empty when Gwen, Rose, and Clem arrived. The TARDIS sat parked by the couch and its doors were closed. "This is your house?" Clem asked as he gazed around the place.

Gwen smiled. "No. That's our house." She pointed at the TARDIS.

Clem looked at her like she was a little bit slow. "That's a box," he said.

"That's a spaceship," Rose corrected.

He stopped, eyes wide, breathing coming in frightened pants. "No! No, I won't go! You can't make me go," he cried. "They tried to put me on a ship, tried to make me go with all the others, but you won't take me!" He turned to bolt, but Gwen grabbed his arm.

"You don't have to go inside, Clem," she told him, her voice low and soothing. "We'll just sit on the couch, yeah? Rose will get us some tea." He was shaking as he lowered himself to the lumpy couch. "Can you smell them, Clem?" Gwen asked him gently. "The 456, are they here?"

He took a deep breath and appeared to calm somewhat. "No," he said after he sniffed the air loudly. "Not here."

The TARDIS door opened and Rhys stepped out. Gwen stood and he hugged her. "Rose said you were back," he murmured.
"This is your husband?" Clem asked.

Rhys grinned at him. "Aye, that's me."

Clem nodded. "I can smell him on you," he confided.


"Right. The others are on their way out," her husband replied. "No idea where Jack and Ianto disappeared to."

"Maybe they got lost," Rose said as she exited the TARDIS. She had a tray of tea fixings in her hands and the Doctor considerately held the door for her. Donna followed them.

"I'm sure they'll surface eventually," the ginger woman said with a smirk.

The Doctor rolled his eyes. "I swear, that's all he thinks about," he muttered mutinously to Rose, who only laughed. She set the tray on the make-shift coffee table (two boxes and a board across them) and sat next to Clem on the couch. Donna stood by Rhys, and the Doctor across from Clem, with the coffee table in between them.

The old man stared at the alien. "You're hers," he said finally, with a sharp jerk of his chin towards Rose. "You're the alien."

The Doctor stepped around the coffee table and moved toward Clem slowly, the way people do around wounded animals. He knelt on the cold cement floor in front of him. "Yes," he said simply, his voice soft. "Yes I am. Is that all right?"

"Guess so," Clem replied. "You don't smell like them other aliens."

"That's because I'm not like them." The corners of his mouth twitched up in a smile. "Can you see Rose staying with me if I was?" Clem considered for a moment, and then shook his head. "I can't either," the Doctor agreed. Then his face shifted a bit and his tone became more businesslike. "You were there the last time they were here, weren't you, Clem?" The man nodded. "I need to see your memory of that night," the Doctor continued. "Is that all right?"

"How?" Clem asked.

"My people are telepathic," the Doctor replied. "I put my hands here—" He brushed his fingertips against his own temples, "on your head, and then you let me in. I won't look at anything you don't want me to. Just imagine a door, and I'll stay out."

The man looked first to Gwen, who gave him an encouraging smile, and then to Rose, who nodded. He took a deep breath and set his mug down on the table. "All right," he said quietly. "Go ahead."

The Doctor laid his fingers on Clem's temples and their eyes closed simultaneously. They stayed still, eyes closed for several minutes, and then Clem gasped and his lids shot up. The Doctor's drifted open more slowly. "It's there," he said. "A latent psychic link." He rose off of his knees and brushed at the dust on his trousers. "Honestly, I'm surprised that they left it."

"Why?" Rhys asked.

"The link is like a road," the Doctor explained. "It can go both ways. If Clem was even the tiniest bit telepathic he could seize control of the link and influence the 456, instead of them influencing him."
The TARDIS door opened and Jack Harkness stuck his head out. "Doctor!" he called. "The lenses are active! Looks like Lois pulled through!"

Clem started at the sound of his voice and when he saw the man casually leaning out of the blue box he jumped off the couch. "It's him!" he yelled and pointed at Jack. "It's the man who took me away!" Gwen stood and he hid behind her. "You tricked me," he accused. "You're working with them! You're going to try and take me again!"

Jack, meanwhile, had turned very, very pale. "Clement MacDonald," he said woodenly. "Just another name. It was easier if you didn't know the names."

"That was a long time ago," Gwen told Clem as he clung to her. "Jack fights aliens now. That's what we're doing, Clem. We're trying to fight them."

Jack stepped out of the TARDIS, but kept well away from the terrified man. "I'm sorry," he said and his eyes were bright with unshed tears. "I'm so, so sorry. I didn't know. I didn't want to know."

The Doctor put a hand on his shoulder. "I think you'd better stay inside, Jack," he murmured. The other man nodded, and went back into the TARDIS. "Will you be all right out here?" the Doctor asked Gwen. "I'd like to see what Lois is dealing with."

The Welsh woman nodded. "We'll be fine." She eased Clem back down on the couch. Now that Jack was no longer in the room he was more relaxed, but still clearly on edge.

Rose stood. "I'd like to see it too," she said. She put a comforting hand on Clem's shoulder and smiled at him. "You'll be safe here, I promise. If you get hungry, just send Rhys in. We've got plenty of food in the kitchen."

Lois was apparently staring at a washroom mirror. Rose pushed past Jack and Ianto to claim the keyboard. "After all," she said, "Lois knows me." She typed a quick 'thank you.'

"Who is that?" the computer asked as Lois's lips moved.

'Rose,' she typed in response. She added a smiley, just for the hell of it.

"What are you, five?" the Doctor asked. She elbowed him.

It was odd seeing the world through the Torchwood lenses, Lois thought as she made her way back to the elevator where Mr. Frobisher and Mrs. Spears were waiting. Little bits of text popped up at seemingly random intervals—messages from Rose and her team. The ride to floor thirteen was tense.

"I suppose it's an honor," Mr. Frobisher said eventually, "being given this position."

Mrs. Spears pursed her lips, not convinced. "Then again," she offered, "the Prime Minister did guarantee that diplomatically he can't enter floor thirteen. So whatever happens up there, if anything goes wrong," she glanced at him. "History will say it wasn't his fault."

Frobisher looked at her, frowning. "Are you saying that he's using me?"

"I'm saying that you don't get to be Prime Minister by accident," Mrs. Spears responded as the elevator ground to a halt and the doors opened with a high-pitched 'ding.' Lois remained silent, although she filed away the conversation. Rose and Gwen would find it interesting, to say the least.
A man in a long brown trench-coat led them down hallways and around corners to a set of double doors. He threw them open and they stepped into a large room that was dominated by a large glass box that was set squarely in the middle of the space. It was about the size of the living room in her flat and thick black steel bars held the panels together. It was filled with a strange bluish-white gas that hid its occupant from view. Desks sat opposite the tank and people, support staff, filed in behind Mr. Frobisher, Mrs. Spears, and Lois.

Rose, the Doctor, Jack, and Ianto watched as Mr. Frobisher took up a position in the middle of the room, between the desks and the tank. He held a paper in his hand, some kind of formal address, most likely. Unfortunately, from Lois's position they saw only his back, and the lip-reading software was useless unless she could see his mouth.

Rose tapped out a message on the keyboard, and Lois obediently began to move. "Good girl," she murmured. It was terrifying, what they were asking her to do, and she was braver than most to attempt it. Finally Frobisher was outlined in profile, and the translation software took over. It was a formal address, Rose was pleased to note. He rambled on a bit about the different countries who were taking part in the negotiations and offered formal greetings. He asked a question, and it was then that Ianto pointed out a rather glaring flaw in their plan.

"We can't hear the aliens," he said quietly. "They don't have a visible mouth."

Jack cursed and Rose typed. The Doctor studied the screen intently. He was leaning in with his elbow on the desk and his hand over his mouth. His side was pressed against Rose's shoulder, which made it difficult to type, but she didn't complain. His eyes were fixed on the screen.

Lois pulled out a pad of paper and a pen and began drawing strange symbols. "What's that?" Jack asked.

"Shorthand," Donna replied. "I can read it." She stood just behind Ianto. Not for the first time, she was glad that she was tall. "It says 'yes.'"

Frobisher continued, but he was interrupted by movement from within the tank. A strange, green, viscous liquid splattered against the glass walls and something that looked like an overgrown scorpion's tale slammed against the panels several times.

"Are you all right?" the computer echoed. "I'm sorry, but I can't help being concerned. Is there a problem?" There was, apparently, silence from the aliens. Frobisher tried again. "Do you want me to continue?"

"Yes," Donna read.

"Right, then," the man continued. "In the spirit of cooperation, we have a formal request to make." He flipped the paper over. "We request that you stop communicating through our children. Some parties view this as a violation." He paused. "Is that acceptable?"

The answer came a moment later. "Yes," Donna said again.

"Thank you," Frobisher replied. A man from one of the desks stood and passed a piece of paper to Frobisher. He read it, hesitated for a long moment, and then turned back to the glass tank. "I have been given a request for specific information. It has been asked—why did the 456 come to Great Britain?"

The silence seemed to stretch out as those in the TARDIS waited for Lois to give them the alien's answer. "We came here," Donna began, "you have no significance. You are middlemen."
"That's a lie," Jack ground out. "They were here before."

"It's Frobisher," the Doctor replied. "They're on the same side. He's covering up their previous visit and for whatever reason the aliens are going along with it. That's why he tried to have you killed, Jack. He didn't want you letting it get around that they'd all ready been here, and that the government gave them children."

"Wait," Donna interrupted. "There's more." Lois was writing again. "We have a request," she read.

"By all means," Frobisher replied.

"We want a gift," Lois wrote. Donna frowned.

Frobisher shifted uncomfortably. "Of course. What, what nature of gift exactly? A gift, gladly, but what do you want?"

"We want your children." Donna's eyes widened as he spoke. Jack looked away. "We will take your children," she continued. More liquid splattered on the glass and the strange stinger-like limbs rattled all sides of the tank.

"I'm sorry." Frobisher turned to glance at the people behind him, his face screwed up in confusion. "So sorry, but I think there must be a problem with the translation software. By children, you mean?"

"Your descendants," Donna read. She looked like she was going to be ill. Her face was very pale. "The offspring of the human race."

"How many?" Frobisher asked.

The reply came quickly. "Ten percent."

Ianto swore. Rose put a hand over her mouth. Jack closed his eyes and hung his head. Donna bolted from the room. Only the Doctor seemed unmoved, but anyone who knew him knew that was a lie. He was still, so still that he seemed to not be breathing. His eyes were wide and dark and his jaw was set. Furious anger rolled off of him in icy waves. Most of the time he appeared to be human, eccentric and occasionally incomprehensible, but human. He did not appear so now.

Rhys poked his head through the door. "Everything all right in here?" he asked. "Donna's on the couch with Clem and Gwen, an' she's cryin'."

"They want ten percent of the world's children," Jack replied, his voice flat.

He took a step back. "Jesus."

"Without Donna we don't know what the 456 are saying," the Doctor pointed out.

"I can read short hand," Ianto offered.

The Doctor nodded. "Then let her stay out there. Keep an eye on her and Clem, will you?" He asked Rhys. The other man nodded, and disappeared back into the warehouse.

Alice Carter sat on the edge of the cold metal bench with her back against the cold metal wall of the cell. Her son Steven was curled up on the rest of the bench, his head in her lap. She stroked his hair absently, her eyes fixed on the wall opposite her, her mind far away. The door creaked open and the officer who had brought them here hours earlier stepped inside. She was of medium height, with
straight brown hair that was gathered into braids by her forehead, but hung loose down her back. Her black trousers and shirt were baggy enough to allow her freedom of movement, but not enough to get in the way. Her gun was strapped to her hip and she wore some kind of armored vest. She moved with the same conscious grace that Alice's father did, but then she'd always known that Jack Harkness was a killer. Apparently this woman was too.

"Just checking up on you," the woman said.

Alice leaned forward and spoke quietly so she did not wake Steven. "I can only assume that you're holding us hostage as insurance against my father." Her voice was even and calm. "Let me warn you. If you've angered him, God help you."

"This from the woman who spent her life running away from him." Her captor snorted derisively.

Alice raised an eyebrow. "Why d'you think I did that? A man who can't die has nothing to fear."

That was a lie. She didn't know, but it was. Jack Harkness was afraid of a great many things, and chief among them was that innocent people would die for or because of him.

"They're coming back," Rose called. Immediately the Doctor materialized beside her. As soon as Frobisher and Lois left the room he had vanished into the TARDIS. He was planning something, she knew, and he would tell them when he was ready and not a moment before.

Frobisher strode out to stand in front of the tank again. He seemed more confident, less hesitant. Anger did that, she knew. The best way to stop being scared was to start being angry. "Hello again," he addressed the alien hiding in the tank. "Before we can even begin to discuss your—request—we need to know exactly what it is you intend to do with the children."

"Somebody is watching," Ianto read. "Some remnant."

"Is it talking about Clem?" Rose asked.

The Doctor frowned. "Maybe. The psychic link is still in place."

Frobisher pointed to the cameraman in the corner. "The Prime Minister is watching through this camera here, and he needs to know what would happen to our children if we were to hand them over to you."

"It is off the record," the aliens replied.

Frobisher nodded. "Yes."

Ianto's eyes widened. "Come in."

"They're sending someone inside?" Jack asked

"The cameraman, it looks like," Rose replied. They watched in silence as the man donned an orange environmental suit and made his way into the gas-filled tank. Lois shifted slightly so that she had a clear view of the television screens to which the camera was linked. At first only fog filled the screen. Then shadows appeared, and as the man drew closer great, stinger-like shapes solidified. There were a great many—ten at least. They dripped more of the viscous green liquid that coated many of the glass panels. The man ventured further in and another, different shape appeared. It was smaller, much smaller, and closer to the ground.
Rose opened her mouth in horror as the vague form became clear. She was going to be sick. It was a child—one of the original children from nineteen sixty-five—and he, she, it, still looked to be about ten years old. Rose couldn't tell for certain because much of the child's face was covered by a metal ventilator that appeared to be fused with the flesh.

"Oh, god," she murmured. Ianto cursed again, this time in Welsh. The TARDIS, being a lady, did not translate, but Rose didn't need to understand exactly what he said—she gathered the feeling just fine.

"Hasn't aged at all," Jack whispered.

The Doctor remained silent.

"This is sick." Rose was pale, very pale. Anger and disgust warred within her, and finally anger won out. "This is just, just, sick."

"What are they using him for?" Jack asked from behind her.

The Doctor shook his head. "Can't tell. The image is too grainy." He growled in frustration. "This is wrong."

"We're gonna fix it, yeah?" Rose asked, although her tone allowed no doubt.

He nodded. "Yeah."

The image blurred then, as if it were underwater. Lois was crying.

"This is unacceptable." The computer echoed Frobisher. Lois blinked back her tears and the lenses cleared.

"We do not harm the children," Ianto read in a choked voice. "They feel no pain. They live long beyond their years."

"That isn't living!" Rose snapped. "That's—that's—I don't have words for what that is!"

"We still don't know," Jack said softly. "We still don't know what it is the 456 are doing to them—with them."

"We have answered your question," Ianto continued, his eyes on the screen. He wiped his face angrily to stem the tears that dripped down his cheeks. "You have one day to select and deliver your ten percent."

"And if we refuse?" Frobisher asked.

There was a long pause, and then Lois drew a few symbols on her pad. Her hand was shaking. "Then we will wipe out the human race."

Ianto stepped back from the computer screen and stood next to Jack. The Doctor was gone—off in the TARDIS working on something. He hadn't said, and the Welshman didn't ask. "This must have been eating away at you," he murmured as he leaned against the desk where Jack sat, shoulders slouched, staring into space.

"I've been doing penance for that day for years," he replied bitterly. "Tell me, Ianto, what should I have done?"
"Stood up to them," the other man told him. He looked at Jack sadly, like he was seeing him for the first time. "I've only just scraped the surface, haven't I?"

Jack crossed his arms over his chest. When he spoke, his voice was hard. "I have lived a long time—longer than the Doctor, even, and I've done a lot of things I'm not proud of. Granted, I don't have the blood of an entire species on my hands, but the idea's pretty much the same." He was silent for a moment. "All that matters is here and now," he said finally. "And this is me. This is who I am."

"But it's not," his lover argued. "How can I know you, Jack? You never say anything. You know about my sister, my father, Lisa. I didn't even know that you traveled with the Doctor until that maniac ripped the Earth out of orbit!"

Jack stood then, pushed himself off the desk and into Ianto's personal space. "I've got to go find the Doctor. I won't be long."

"You're doing it again," Ianto replied.

Jack whirled around. "I need to find him so I can help him build whatever brilliant device is going to stop these things. Is that all right?" He didn't wait for an answer.

The door slammed behind him and Ianto did not jump. Instead he stared after the man that he loved, but didn't know. "How do you do it?" he asked after a while, still staring at the door. "How do you love someone like that?"

Rose considered for a moment. "It's not easy," she said finally. "It never is, loving a hero. He's larger than life, Jack, and he's got the baggage to go with it. You just—you've got to listen, but don't stop pushing. Make him grow." She stood, and laid a comforting hand on his shoulder. "It's not easy, but it's worth it."

A few hours later Rose was napping on a couch in the library and Donna was watching the computer screen. The Doctor and Jack were still gone. Gwen and Rhys sat with Clem. Rhys had carted one of the televisions out of the movie room and set it up outside. It remained linked to the TARDIS and they were watching some cartoon. Ianto deposited a mug of coffee next to Donna's elbow. She smiled at him.

"I like how you think, Ianto Jones." She sipped the coffee and sighed appreciatively. "That, that is the best coffee I've ever had." She grinned at him. "Are you really attached to Jack? Because if you're not, I might have to steal you away for myself."

He smiled at her and replied in his soft, polite way. "Yes ma'am, I'm afraid I am."

The computer screen flickered into life. The lenses were active again. "Cabinet office briefing room A," Donna read. "Quick, get Rose! She'll want to see this. And find himself, if you can. The TARDIS will help."

Ianto set off down the hallway at a brisk jog. Rose was in the room almost immediately and Jack and the Doctor weren't far behind.

"Gold Command," Jack commented. "They're formulating their strategy."

"Ladies and gentlemen," the computer said. "It's been decided we're going to make the 456 an offer." That was Brian Green, the Prime Minister, speaking. "A realistic number, something we can manage, and then we're going to see what happens."
"You mean we're going to haggle," a woman snapped. "What about the military option?"

"There's nothing to take action against," a man explained. "Our satellites are showing nothing."

"Is that true, Doctor?" Donna asked.

"For them, maybe," he replied with just a little arrogance. "But not for us. The TARDIS is a magnificent ship, and her scanners are much more sophisticated than anything on twenty-first century Earth."

"There's a target sat in Thames house," the woman pointed out.

The man shook his head. "That would be a declaration of war—a war, I might point out, that we can't win."

"Which is why," Mr. Green broke in, "I have invited John to address Gold Command. In terms of managing the figures, what could we offer and get away with?"

Frobisher turned to Lois. "Get me the FAS files," he ordered. Mrs. Spears handed him a manila folder. Then he turned away from Lois. Donna groaned in frustration. Their software was fantastic, but it couldn't read his lips when Lois couldn't see them.


"They're really going to do this," Rose murmured. "I feel like I should be surprised—but I'm not."

"Humans," the Doctor said heavily. "you've done some of the most amazing, brilliant things—and also some of the most terrible."

Green was speaking again. "The idea is that every country makes a camouflageable contribution."


"We need more," the man who talked about war said. "Can you bump the numbers up to sixty units?"

"Units!" Rose exclaimed. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were bright. "Listen to them, tryin' to make like they aren't human beings! They're children for cryin' out loud!" The Doctor wrapped an arm around her.

"I know," he murmured. "I know."

Mr. Green ordered Frobisher back to the Thames house. "Offer them sixty units and no more."

Gwen frowned. "Clem, are you all right?" she asked.

The man was staring into space. "Three two five zero zero zero," he said. It was a mantra that he repeated over and over again. "Three two five zero zero zero."

"Jack!" she yelled. "I think something's happening!" He was out of the TARDIS in an instant. "He just started," Gwen told him, gesturing to Clem.

"I think it's safe to say that their final offer was rejected," Jack told her. "Three hundred twenty-five thousand is one tenth of the children in the United Kingdom. And if he's doing it—"
"Then all the other children are too," Gwen finished.

"It's been confirmed," one of the members of the Gold Command group said. "The children in each country are saying a different number, and in every case that number is ten percent of the children living in that country."

"Our final offer has been rejected," Mr. Green stated. The man nodded sharply. "With regrets, ladies and gentlemen," he continued. "I must inform you that we're now facing the worst case scenario, and right now we don't have time for a discussion on ethics. All we can do at the moment is address a number of vital, practical questions. Namely, how do we select the ten percent, and how do we sell it to the voters?" He turned to Frobisher, who said something.

"Having one side of this conversation is rather annoying," Ianto noted.

"Better than nothing," Donna shot back. "Hold on, Lois is writing." She paused and squinted a bit at the screen. "Once the selection is made, my office can arrange to bus the children to the drop point, school by school," she said. "You just need to decide what criteria you're using for selection purposes."

"If it were completely random," a black man started, but was interrupted by the same woman who had interrupted Mr. Green earlier.

"No one will believe that it was random," she bit out. "Not unless some of us are seen waiting for empty busses to come back."

"But if it were random and demonstrably fair," he tried again, "then at least we could defend ourselves."

"So you're willing to risk your kids to make it look fair?" she asked incredulously.

"How else should we choose?" he snapped back.

"We could do it alphabetically," another man offered.

"Oh yes, thanks for that suggestion Mr. Yeats!" the woman replied bitterly.

The man, Mr. Yeats, appeared flustered. "Look, it's not—I don't have kids, I wasn't trying to—"

"He has no kids," the woman pointed out, "and yours have grown up," she said to the other man.

"Let's keep it civil, Denise," Mr. Green requested.

"Civil!" Denise snorted. "Let's discuss the loss of millions of innocent children, and let's be civil about it!"

"If you wouldn't mind," he said with a sharp smile, "yes."

"Could we limit it to one loss per family?" the first man spoke up again. "Every second child, perhaps?"

"That would take time we don't have," Mr. Green reminded him.

The table was silent for a moment, and then Denise spoke up. "Look, I'm going to say what everyone else is thinking. If this—lottery takes place, then my kids aren't in it."
"I'm sure the families of Gold Command would be exempt," Mr. Green replied soothingly. "Hard enough as it is; no need to make it harder."

"Of course," Rose said bitterly. "Risk everyone's neck but your own, or in this case, everyone's child."

"Whatever happens," Green continued. "The children and grandchildren of people around this table will be exempt."

"What about nieces and nephews?" Denise asked.

"Don't push it!" Green snapped.

Denise leaned back in her chair. "You don't expect me to look my brother in the eye and tell him I'm sorry that his children are being sacrificed to some alien? What am I supposed to do, buy him a sympathy card?"

"That's the responsibility of government," he replied.

"No," she countered. "The first responsibility is to protect the best interests of this country, right?" No one disagreed with her. "Then let's say it. In a national emergency a country must plan for the future and discriminate between those who are vital to the continued stability of the nation and those who are not."

They listened in silent horror as Denise outlined her plan to placate the 456. She argued that they should take the three hundred and twenty-five thousand children from the lowest performing ten percent of schools. It was these schools that would turn out, in her words, people who were less able, less socially useful. Those destined to spend a lifetime on benefits, occupying places on the dole queue and in the prisons. She broke down children, children, into valuable and not valuable based on their expected contribution to society.

Rose was shaking with fury. She had dropped out of school (one of the schools that were deemed 'failing,' in all likelihood) at the age of fifteen. According to Denise's plan she was worthless, a waste of space, someone who wouldn't be missed. She'd saved the world hundreds of times, saved thousands of lives, and seen things that those small-minded, prejudiced paper-pushers wouldn't believe. Life, all life, was precious. It couldn't be put into categories of 'useful' and 'not useful.'

The proposal was accepted. Frobisher was directed to implement it. No one around the table looked pleased, but neither did they object. Not one person.

"We have enough evidence to destroy everyone in that room," Gwen said softly. Clem was asleep on the couch. Rhys sat on the floor with his back against the bottom of the couch. Donna stood in front of them, rubbing her arms in the chill air. She'd told them about the government's plan.

She nodded. "That's what the Doctor thinks, yeah."

"So what's the plan?" Rhys asked.

"He's going to give them a chance," She replied.

"And what if they say no?" Gwen demanded. "What then?"

"We cry havoc," Rose said flatly as she closed the TARDIS door behind them, "and let slip the dogs..."
of war."
"What do you mean, we're not going to be there?" Donna demanded.

The Doctor ran a hand through his hair. "I need someone to take care of our copy of the footage," he replied. "To do that, you have to be somewhere safe. Plus, I need someone to look after Jack's family once we pick them up." He sighed. "I know it's not what you want to do, Donna, but it's where I need you. Ianto and Gwen will be waiting here so they can spread the word to the special ops people Frobisher put on their scent, Rose will be in the TARDIS monitoring everything, and Jack and I will deal with the 456."

"Why does it have to be you two?" She asked.

"We're the least likely to die," he said quietly. "Well, and stay dead." He paused for a moment. "Can you do this for me, Donna? Please?"

She sighed. "I guess. Give me the laptop, then, before I change my mind."

Donna knocked on the door of the large, rather imposing house as the sound of the TARDIS dematerializing faded. Rhys glanced around. "Nice place, bit posh," he commented. "How did they get pulled into this business?"

"The Doctor said they're old friends," she replied. "Him and the Brigadier. We met a while back, for him, anyway. Few days ago for us. He seemed a decent sort."

An elegantly dressed older woman opened the door. She smiled at them. "Hello, can I help you?"

Donna straightened. "I'm Donna Noble, and this is Rhys Williams and Clem MacDonald, and we're looking for Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart. The Doctor sent us."

The woman held out her hand. "I'm Doris, his wife. Come in. I'll fetch him."

Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart was a tall, stocky man in his late seventies. He had a thick salt-and-pepper mustache and a no-nonsense attitude left over from his time in UNIT. He nodded a greeting. "Miss Noble, Mr. Williams, Mr. MacDonald. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Donna held out the laptop. "The Doctor sent us, with this. I think you'll want to see it, sir."

Gwen sat on the couch. Her laptop, which was still linked to the Torchwood contact lenses that Lois was wearing, sat on the make-shift coffee table in front of her. The Doctor moseyed over from the
TARDIS and plopped down next to her. She was staring at the laptop with a sort of dazed expression on her face as she worried her bottom lip with her teeth.

"You don't have to do this," he said quietly. "I can drop you off with Donna and Clem and Rhys at Alistair's."

She shook her head. "Can't let Ianto go in there alone. Besides, that's not it." She gave him a tight grin. "Been in tighter places loads of times. Part of the job, I suppose."

"What is it then?" he asked.

She was silent for a while, apparently thinking. "I always wanted to ask Jack about you in the old days. He hardly ever mentioned you, but when he did—he trusted you, trusts you, completely and totally. He has such faith in you, faith that you'd be there, that you'd stop whatever it was that needed stopping. And I wanted to know why you didn't come, why all those times in history you never showed up. You were the Doctor and you saved the world—except when you didn't." She sighed. "But I know now. After all of this—you must look at this planet, sometimes, look at us, at humanity, and turn away in shame."

It was the Doctor's turn to sigh. "Oh, Gwen, it's not like that, not like that at all." He stretched his long legs out, put his hands behind his head, and stared at the ceiling of the warehouse. "Have I been disappointed? Yes. Have there been times that I've vowed to leave this tiny, petty little planet with its petty wars and squabbles and its people's inability to see beyond their own noses behind? Yes. But then I see something or someone and it makes me stop, makes me remember that for every disappointing, horrifying bit, there are twice as many selfless, beautiful, awe-inspiring moments." He chuckled darkly. "And besides, I'm no saint. I've done things, Gwen, things that make the sins of this planet seem paltry in comparison."

Ianto poked his head out of the TARDIS. "Are we ready?"

The Doctor stood, once more a bundle of manic energy. If Gwen hadn't witnessed his dark, somber mood she would have said it never happened. Bloody hell, he was worse than Jack at hiding his emotions. "All set out here, I think. Remember, Rose will give you the cue after Lois sets everything in motion."

Ianto nodded. "Rose is done explaining, by the way. Lois wrote that she'll try."

The Doctor grinned. Unlike his previous grins which ran along the lines of exuberant with a hint of mania, this expression was predatory, a baring of the teeth more than a smile. "Fantastic."

Lois stared at the large mirror that hung over the row of sinks in the ladies. She was about to go into a room filled with possibly the most important people in the United Kingdom and tell them that she'd been working with a group of people that had quite possibly been branded as traitors. She had committed treason. Her hands were shaking, she noted absently. For a moment she had the overwhelming urge to refuse, to slip out the door and run until she collapsed, far away from the world she been sucked into.

And then she remembered the child, attached somehow to those, those things. They were going to let that happen to three hundred and twenty-five thousand children, children who had done nothing wrong, whose only fault was being born in a world with governments that valued power and reputation over human life.
She took a deep breath and straightened her back. She stared at her reflection in the mirror and nodded sharply. She would do this. She had to do this. There was no turning back. And maybe, just maybe, they would pull it off and the world would be a better place for it.

"We need a cover story," Frobisher said, "to explain why the operation is happening and to encourage participation." He stood at the head of the table and all eyes were on him. "The suggestion is that we announce that the children will be given some sort of inoculation—a jab to keep them from speaking in unison. We stress that there's no immediate danger, that everyone will be seen in due course. Then, when it goes wrong and the children disappear, we blame the aliens."

"We say the 456 double-crossed us?" one of the men asked.

"Excellent," Mr. Yeats admitted. "It is the aliens' fault. That is where the blame should lie, not with us."

Frobisher nodded. "We play the part of naïve dupes rather than willing accomplices."

"We're not willing," Green cut him off. "No one around this table is willing."

But, Lois noted silently, no one around the table was trying to stop it either.

Mr. Green continued to speak. "Thank you John." He nodded to Frobisher and then turned to the rest of Gold Command. "Comments?"

Lois raised her hand, but they ignored her. Instead they murmured about removing the police and bringing in the Army. She tried raising her hand higher, but her job was to be invisible and she found that getting anyone to notice her was far more difficult than Mrs. Spears had made it sound in the elevator. The older woman had seemed to think that Lois's very presence would draw attention to herself. She was wrong. If anything, her job made her akin to the surrounding furniture, part of the room but easily forgotten.

It was perfect for a spy. Less perfect for a revolutionary.

They were talking about reconvening. Her opportunity was almost gone. Lois took a deep breath, and spoke up. "I have something to say."

"Lois, stop it!" Mrs. Spears hissed.

Mr. Green smiled patronizingly at her. "Really? Well, it's nice you want to make a contribution. What was your name?"

"Lois," she answered. Her hands were still shaking, but she found that his condescension helped to keep her voice level. She wasn't going to let that smug bastard see that she was afraid, not after what she'd witnessed. Especially not with what she knew was coming. "Lois Habiba, sir," she continued, and stood.

"Well," he said dismissively. "Thank you for your hard work, Lois. It's much appreciated, but this really isn't the time."

She took another breath and realized that her hands had stopped shaking. Anger did wonders for the spirit, she supposed, as did adrenaline. "I'm sorry, sir. I know I'm only supposed to be here to take notes, but I am a voter."
"Listen, love," Mr. Yeats began, just as smug and superior as Mr. Green had been. "This isn't a referendum."

Mrs. Spears stood. "Lois," she said calmly, but with an edge to her voice. "Can I have a word outside?"

"No," Lois continued, addressing Mr. Yeats and ignoring Mrs. Spears, "but it does need saying."

"Lois, seriously." Mr. Frobisher frowned at her. "Not now."

"And I'm not just speaking on my own behalf." She had started, and she'd be damned if she let them stop her now.

Mr. Yeats snorted. "Just what we need, a revolutionary."

She gave him a challenging look, but kept her voice even. "If you like, sir, then that's what I am. If believing that handing over millions of innocent children to aliens who are going to use them for God knows what makes you a revolutionary, then yes sir, I am one."

He raised an eyebrow. "You and whose army?" he mocked.

"Torchwood," she replied flatly, "and a man they call the Doctor."

The silence that fell over the room was palpable.

"What?" Mr. Green asked finally, his eyes wide and his mouth open as if he could not comprehend her words.

"Don't be ridiculous!" Frobisher snapped.

"Torchwood has been recording all these meetings," Lois continued. "Everything that's been said around this table, and there's someone who'd like a word with you all."

From her position in the TARDIS, monitoring the proceedings, Rose Tyler whooped. "She's doing it, Doctor!" she called.

He stuck his head inside the door. "Has she given the signal?"

A slow, vicious smile spread across her face. "Any moment now." She brought a hand to her ear and activated the communicator nestled against her eardrum. "It's time, Ianto. Make the call."

Donna sat bolt upright. She'd been dosing on the large, comfy couch located in the Lethbridge-Stewart's spacious living room while the Brigadier perused the footage from the Gold Command meetings. She'd been startled before when a particularly revolting moment resulted in a low burst of very colorful language, but the noise that had woken her seemed to come from within her ear, not without. Rhys looked up from the arm chair he occupied and the Brigadier turned to face her from his position at a large, dark, wooden desk.

"It's starting," she told them. "Rose just gave Ianto the go-ahead to break cover."

"Aye," Rhys replied softly. The Brigadier only nodded, and then returned his attention to the laptop. Donna noted that the Welshman's knuckles were white where he gripped the arm of the chair. Be
safe, she thought, sending her wishes up as a prayer. Be safe, and come back alive.

The phone rang at Rhiannon Davies' house. "Pipe down, you lot!" she ordered the children who were currently running rampant through her house. Two of them were her own, the rest belonged to friends and neighbors, people who needed to work and couldn't just leave their children at home alone while the schools were closed.

"Hello?" she answered it.

"It's me." Ianto's voice crackled over the speakers. He was more intense than she'd heard him in a long while.

She blinked. "I thought you couldn't call here. Is it all over?"

"It's only just beginning," he replied firmly.

Her husband sidled up to her and raised his eyebrows inquiringly. "It's Ianto," she told him.

"Tell him that I want my car back in one piece!" Johnny Davies replied forcefully.

Ianto ignored him. "That column of fire at eleven, did you see it on the telly?"

She rolled her eyes. "No, I was watching the other side. Of course I saw it!" He smiled a bit, but only briefly. "The kids said 'they are coming,' but who's they?"

"Just listen for a moment." The authority in his tone, so unlike anything she'd heard him use before, gave her pause. This was not Ianto-her-brother, this was Ianto-Torchwood-operative speaking.
"They're from another planet. And they want kids, millions of kids. Over the next few days don't let anyone take David and Misha from you, not for any reason. This goes for you people listening in on the wire as well. Forget the official secrets act; if you've got children or grandchildren then you need to hear this, and tell every parent you know." He paused. The people who were doubtlessly tracing the call probably had their location by now. He took a deep breath and forged on. Just in case, he needed to tell them. Just in case. "Look, I've got to go. I love you, and I love the kids. I'm even warming up to Johnny."

"We love you too," his sister replied, and then the line went dead.

Her husband stared at her. "Well, what was that about?"

She didn't reply. Instead she crossed the room to where their son David sat on the couch and hugged him to her.

Right on schedule, just after he hung up the phone a group of special ops soldiers burst into the warehouse, including the woman who had overseen Alice and Steven's kidnapping and the bombing of Torchwood three. Gwen and Ianto sat in the middle of the empty space, on the couch, staring at the laptop. They did not deign to notice the men and women who surrounded them, guns at the ready.

"I hate this!" Rhys snapped as he paced. "I hate being shut out of the way. They're just putting us here because they think we can't hack it. They're out there risking their lives and they want us to be safe.
Donna shook her head. "They need us to keep this information hidden," she told him. "What happens if they get captured? Someone's got to be the insurance." She nodded at the desk where the Brigadier continued to review the footage. "We've got them backed into a corner with that."

"We've been expecting you," Gwen told the woman dressed in black with a bit of a smile.

"On the floor!" she snapped. Gwen and Ianto did not move. "Face down, hands on your head!"

"You traced Ianto's call, did you?" the Welsh woman continued.

"On the floor!" The order had much the same affect that the others had, namely, nothing.

Gwen didn't bat an eyelash. "Now that you're here you can take us to Alice and Steven Carter.

"You'll be in the very next cell," the woman snarled. Their calm, almost flippant attitude grated on her nerves. She had them surrounded, and at gunpoint! They should be jumping to do as she said, and yet they were acting as if they had all happened to meet on an afternoon stroll. "On second thought, maybe I'll just have you shot while resisting arrest."

All of the playfulness drained from Gwen's attitude and left only a confident determination. "That would be a mistake," she told the woman flatly.

"Oh, and why is that?"

Gwen gestured at the computer screen. "Take a look at what we've been recording. Because what Lois is telling them now, is that my gorgeous husband and our brilliant friend Donna have a copy of all of them secretly agreeing to sacrifice millions of innocent children to the aliens." The woman's gun, which had been pointing directly at Gwen's forehead drifted down to face the floor. Shock and disbelief fought for control of her features. "Now," the Welsh woman continued, "they're at a secure, secret location, and he's ready to press 'send' and let the world know exactly what's been going on unless, of course, you do as we say."

Ianto stood. "Take a seat," he told her. "Maybe you'll learn something about the people you've been working for."

"How exactly are you going to make us do this?" Mr. Green asked Lois. "Torchwood's been destroyed."

"The building has been destroyed," she corrected him, "and I think she wants to talk to you about that as well, or rather, she'll talk and you'll listen." And then she glanced down at the pad of paper clutched in her hand and drew one symbol—run.

Rose strapped on the Dimension Canon and double-checked the coordinates. The Doctor held her jacket out and she took it with a grateful smile. "You don't have to do this," he said. "Jack and I are perfectly capable."

"You two need to be in the TARDIS," she reminded him. "Besides, I want to give them a piece of my mind."

He smiled at her and brushed an errant lock of hair back behind her ear. "Do your mum proud."
She stood on her tip-toes and pressed a gentle kiss to his lips. "See you in a bit."

He rubbed her nose with his own. "Not if I see you first."

She was gone in a flash of light.

Lightning without thunder filled Cabinet Office briefing room A. The men and women around the table shielded their eyes, and when the flash died a woman was standing in front of them. She was of medium height and of a somewhat curvy build. Her jaw was square and her lips full; thick, dark eyelashes surrounded warm brown eyes and dark eyebrows set off features that were too strong to be classically beautiful. Honey-blond hair hung straight and thick down her back. It was a singularly expressive face, and it was sent in lines that were not at all friendly.

It was Rose, but not the Rose that Lois had met in the chippy. That was Rose the friend, the comforter, the girl who traveled through space and time with the man (alien) she loved. This was Rose who led Torchwood until they turned against her, Rose who walked the Earth for a year protecting Martha Jones.

"Who the hell are you?" Mr. Green snapped.

She stood in front of them nonchalantly and cocked an eyebrow. "I'm Dame Rose Tyler of the Powell Estate," she said, as if they were rather slow. Frobisher's eyes widened, she noticed, although most of the people around the table appeared nonplussed. "I'm here," she continued, "on behalf of my friend. You may know him—his name is the Doctor." Ah, that got a reaction out of them.

"What," Mr. Green sputtered, but she cut him off.

"No. I've got a question for you from the Doctor later, but right now I'm going to talk and you're going to listen." She glared at them, and anger seemed to radiate from her like heat. "You killed my friend," she said quietly. "You killed him, and you knew that he wouldn't stay dead, so while you had him out you cut him open and you put a bomb in him. Then you waited for him to come back like you knew he would, waited for him to get back to his home and meet with his team, with people who risk their lives every day to keep you safe, and then you detonated the bomb." Her words fell like stones in the silence. "You blew him up. And then you picked him up and waited for him to come back so you could encase him in concrete, alive." She paused. "Has anyone ever been blown up? Or maybe drowned?" They were silent. "It could be arranged, you know. And it would be, if the Doctor was anything but the man he is. He thinks you deserve a chance." Her lips twisted into a sardonic smile. "I'm not so sure. Not after what I've seen you do today. This," Rose said as she gestured at them, at their plan of action, "has to be one of the sickest things I've ever seen, and that's saying something, because I've been imprisoned and tortured and used as a science experiment by human beings, people who believed they were doing the right thing. I've watched people murder entire planets for the sake of greed or power, but this, this takes the cake."

Jack swore. They were floating in the Vortex awaiting Rose's return with the schematics of the base where Alice and Steven, and hopefully also Gwen and Ianto, were being held. He was monitoring the situation in Cabinet Office briefing room A and the Doctor was behind him, lounging on the sofa pretending to read something by Charles Dickens.

"You bastard," he snapped. "Why didn't you tell me?"
The Doctor glanced up. "What?"

"Why," Jack ground out, "didn't you tell me about Rose and torture?"

"Ah." The Doctor set his book down. "It wasn't my place, Jack. If Rose wanted you to know about what happened in Pete's world then she would tell you."

"So it doesn't bother you at all?" he asked the alien scathingly. "Doesn't matter that someone cut her open just to hurt her, to make her scream? Doesn't matter that several some ones probably had their hands coated in her blood? Doesn't matter that she might have begged for death?"

Suddenly he was against the wall. Jack blinked, entirely uncertain of how he'd got there, but the Doctor's hands held his wrists next to his head and the alien's face was centimeters from his own. If he could have, he would have flinched away from the expression on the alien's face. If looks could kill he'd have been dead in a second.

"Don't ever even think that again," the Doctor growled. And yes, growl was the only appropriate word to describe his voice. It was low and rough and promised death (or worse) to anyone who crossed him. "If going there didn't mean that two universes would fall into the Void I would tear down that world's Torchwood. I would take it apart stone by stone, raze it to the ground, and then salt the Earth. I would hunt down each and every one who took part in that obscenity and show them what it means to wish they were never born."

They remained as they were for a moment, until Jack nodded slightly. "I believe you," he said.

The Doctor released his wrists and stalked back to the couch. Jack returned to the chair in front of the laptop, and they silently waited for Rose's signal.

"So here's your chance," she continued. The members of Gold Command were watching her with wary interest. "And you only get one. One opportunity to do the right thing." She took a deep breath. "This is your choice: you can help him fix this situation and everyone can go home, or you can try and stop us. We'll still stop the aliens, because that's what we do, but we will stop you if we have to. And if we have to, then everyone in the world will know exactly what you were planning to do."

She glared at each of them in turn, and they to a man that they could not return her stare. Something in her eyes, something golden and furious smoldered. She let the silence stretch out for a long moment, and then she spoke again. "Think about it. You have an hour." Rose crossed the room and held out her hand. Lois shook it and Rose palmed the flashdrive that had been concealed in the other woman's fingers. "Thanks," she murmured. "We won't forget this."

She strode back to her original position and punched coordinates for the TARDIS into her Canon. She paused just before she hit the final sequence, almost like it was an afterthought. "Oh, and if you harm Lois in any way, we'll know, and then the deal is off."

She was gone in a flash of light.

Gwen and Ianto sat across from Alice and Steven Carter. Ianto was staring, he knew that he was staring, and yet he found himself unable to stop. She looked so much like Jack. Even Steven did, like a tiny glimpse of what his lover looked like as a child.

Gwen was explaining their plan. "Right, so, I'm Gwen and this is Ianto, and we work with Jack."
"You're Torchwood," Alice guessed.

They nodded. "We are," he said, "and we're going to get you out of here, both of you."

Alice laughed incredulously. "How?" she exclaimed. "If you hadn't noticed, you're locked up with us, and there are at least ten men with guns out there."

Gwen grinned. "We've got friends." She leaned forward. "Tell me, Steven," she said to the boy. "How would you like to take a ride in a spaceship?"

His eyes were huge. "A real spaceship?"

She nodded and Alice gaped. "A real spaceship." A strange grinding groan came from just outside the cell and a wind whipped against the metal door. Ianto and Gwen stood. "And there's our ride!" she declared.

Alice was looking at them like they were mad. "What's going on?" she snapped. A high pitched buzzing assaulted her ears and she clapped her hands over them. The door swung open and Rose was beaming at them in front of the TARDIS.

"Come on, then!" she called. "They'll be after us in a second!" She opened the door and ducked inside. Gwen and Ianto followed her, pulling Alice and Steven along behind them.

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Alice Carter froze as the door slammed shut behind her. It was a box, a blue box that said 'Police' on the front and couldn't have been more than three meters high and less than a meter wide. Inside, however, it was huge. They were in some kind of cavernous control room that was dominated by a console at the center surrounding a bluish-green pillar that stretched to the ceiling. Two men were dashing around the console, one with wild brown hair and a pinstriped suit, and the other was—

"Uncle Jack!" Steven shouted, and ran to him. Jack Harkness paused in his button-pushing and lever-throwing and swept his grandson up into a hug. He pulled the little boy close to him and rested his chin on Steven's head.

"Hello," he said quietly. "You and your mum got out okay, then?"

Steven nodded. "Is this a spaceship?" he asked, his eyes wide and excited.

Jack smiled. "It is. As a matter of fact, it's his spaceship." He pointed to the Doctor, who had just thrown the last switch and taken them into the Vortex. It was a remarkably smooth departure, although the tell-tale grinding moan rang through the room. His task accomplished, the Doctor was leaning against the console with Rose's fingers laced through his own. He smiled and waved at the newcomers.

"Hello!" he said brightly. "I'm the Doctor, and this is Rose, and this," he motioned to the ship around them, "is the TARDIS and she's very pleased to meet you both."

Steven's forehead wrinkled. "She?"

Jack nodded. "She's alive."

"Woah." His grandson was staring all around in wonder. "Uncle Jack, you have the best friends."

"Yeah," Jack said softly. "I think I do."
Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction
Ice is also great
And would suffice.

Brigadier Sir Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart sat woodenly in front of his desk. The laptop screen was black: the footage was over. Rhys had gone outside for a walk and Doris had taken Donna and Clem to a spare bedroom so they could get some sleep. He gathered that they'd been working for a long while. Doris knew better than to disturb him. Most times he would welcome her clever mind and her calm understanding—but not now. Now he wanted to hit the wall, to break something. It would do her no good to see him like this.

An image popped up on the screen in front of him. He blinked. The Doctor was staring at him, and when he hovered the mouse over the alien's face a button marked 'play' appeared. He pressed it.

The image began to move. "Hello Alistair," the Doctor said, grinning brightly at him. "Sorry about turning your house into a refugee camp without a by-your-leave. Rose tells me that's rude, but it was the safest place I could think of that wasn't here in the TARDIS. There should be four more people on the way—Rhys's wife Gwen, Ianto Jones, and Alice and Steven Carter. Ianto and Gwen work with Jack, and Steven and Alice are his daughter and grandson. They were being held hostage against Torchwood's good behavior." He paused, and the smile faded a bit. "If all goes well I'll be meeting you for tea in a few hours. Rose has been pestering me to pay a visit, seems to think that I need to keep in touch more often." He grumbled a bit, but it was good-natured, the kind that marked a longstanding but amiable disagreement. "If not, if things go pear-shaped, I've included a tracking program. The government can't find the 456 ship, but their technology is rubbish compared to the TARDIS. If I can't stop them, I need UNIT to do so." He sighed. "I hope it won't come to that, but if it does—blow them up. Don't let them take the children." The Doctor smiled at him then, but it was sad. "And if something should happen, then goodbye, my oldest and best friend." Then the screen flickered and once more went dark.

He sighed and rested his head in his hands. It was going to be a long day.

The familiar sound of the TARDIS brought Alistair from his study, where he had taken the laptop in order to give Donna and Rhys a bit of peace, to the front door. He opened it before the new arrivals had a chance to knock. Gwen blinked at him, her hand closed into a fist and hovering a few inches from where the wooden door had been.
"Mrs. Williams," he said in greeting. "Mr. Jones, Mrs. Carter, and you'd be Steven." They nodded. Alice held her son's hand tightly and pulled him closer to her. "Come in." He held the door open and motioned for them to enter. "We've been expecting you."

Brian Green, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland sat silent in the midst of the chaos that had erupted at the disappearance of Dame Rose Tyler of the Powell Estate. He stared at the wall as members of Gold Command raged and debated around him.

"We can't let him do this!" Mr. Yeats declared. "We don't negotiate with terrorists!"

"Bollocks!" another man snapped. "The government was in almost constant contact with the IRA during the Troubles, at least this man—alien—whatever might be able to help us."

"He's holding us hostage!" Denise protested. "How's that for an indication of his intentions?"

"How is what we were talking about earlier an different?" the man wanted to know. "Aren't the aliens terrorists? They're the ones holding us at gunpoint, figuratively speaking." He paused. "Or it could be literally speaking, we don't know since we can't locate their ship."

Mr. Green finally spoke. "John?" he asked Mr. Frobisher. "You were Torchwood's government contact. What do you know about this 'Doctor'"

Frobisher blinked. "Ah. Yes, well, The Royal Torchwood Institute was originally formed in 1869 to defend Great Britain from various alien threats. The Doctor is named in the original charter as an alien of particular interest."

"So he is dangerous!" Denise crowed.

"He is an incredibly dangerous individual," Frobisher agreed, "but the correct question is dangerous to whom?" He shuffled some papers absently. "The Doctor spent several years employed by the Unified Intelligence Task Force in the 1970's. Although he is no longer listed as an active member he is nonetheless still affiliated with UNIT and was reported to be responsible for defeating the Sontaran invasion that occurred in August 2008. Even Queen Victoria, the founder of the Torchwood Institute admitted that the Doctor was responsible for her escape from an alien menace. In fact, he received a knighthood for his troubles, after which he was promptly banished." He paused. "By all accounts, he is no one to be trifled with."

"What about that woman?" Mr. Yeats asked.

Frobisher nodded. "Dame Rose Tyler was the Doctor's companion when he encountered Queen Victoria. There are other records of the two of them—in Cardiff on December 24th of 1869 witnesses reported a woman matching her description and a man who called himself 'the Doctor' as responsible for an explosion that destroyed a funeral home. In June of 1953 a Detective Inspector Bishop reported that a man known only as 'the Doctor' assisted in defeating an alien which used televisions to steal an individual's face. One of those affected was listed as 'Rose Tyler, the Doctor's companion.' In both instances it was noted that the Doctor seemed quite fond of her. In more recent times UNIT reported her presence aboard the aircraft carrier Valiant during the incident surrounding Harold Saxon." Several people around the table paled. "She was apparently instrumental to his downfall and was injured in the process. Their last recorded appearance was in 2008, when the Earth was pulled from its orbit." He set the papers down neatly in front of him. "Harriet Jones's notes were quite clear, sir," he said to Mr. Green. "She asserted that the Doctor, and only the Doctor, could defeat the aliens known as the Daleks. Somehow she believed that Dame Tyler would assist him. History would appear to support her claims."
All eyes turned to Mr. Green. He took a deep breath, and nodded. "Let him know," he told Lois, "that we will take this chance."

The Doctor handed the man in the brown trench coat a slip of paper. "Can you redirect the live TV feed to this number as well?" he asked, his brainy specs perched on the end of his nose.

The man took the paper and nodded once. "Should be able to, sir."

The Doctor clapped him on the shoulder. "Good man. And don't call me sir. And whatever you do, don't salute. I hate salutes." They were standing on the thirteenth floor of Thames house, just outside the room that housed the tank with one of the 456 ensconced within. He glanced at Jack. "All right?"

The other man nodded. "Let's get this show on the road." He threw open the doors and strode inside. The man in the brown coat—Decker, someone had said—scurried over to the recording equipment and pressed a series of buttons. The Doctor swaggered into the room like he owned the place. It was typical, really. There was nothing that put an enemy off, he always said, like confidence. Gets them on edge, makes them doubt themselves, makes them more likely to listen to whatever you're going to say. Jack followed his friend more cautiously. It was amazing how quickly he fell into familiar patterns of engagement. He treated the Doctor like he would his commanding officer, and in a way the alien was. His time with Rose and the Doctor dictated the course of his life.

He took the initiative with the 456. "I'm Captain Jack Harkness," he said to the tank. His back was straight and his head level. The Doctor stood next to him with his hands buried in the pockets of his suit jacket. For once he had declined to bring his coat. "I've dealt with you lot before. This," he gestured to his friend, "is the Doctor, and he's here to explain why, this time, you're not getting what you want."

"You yielded in the past," the alien replied.

"Ah, but I didn't," the Doctor said. He moved forward, setting himself apart from Jack. "The last time you visited this planet I wasn't here. Had I been, the situation may have ended quite differently."

"Explain."

"There's a saying that I've found useful in these situations," the Doctor said lightly. "'An injury to one is an injury to all.' Now, I know that these human beings don't seem like much. They've barely learned to walk, after all." He rocked on the balls of his feet. "They don't even have intergalactic travel—but what they do have is determination. Human beings are one of the most stubborn species I've ever met. That gets them into trouble mostly, starts wars and all that, but when they turn that determination to goal, whether it be travel to the moon or ending the spread of polio, they achieve it. And when they act according to that saying I mentioned, then the human race is one of the finest species in the universe." The small smile dropped from his lips as the lightness dropped from his voice. "Because I've seen it. I've been to the future and I know what humanity achieves. By the year five billion humans have touched every star in the sky, spread out over thousands of planets and hundreds of galaxies and you, you're nowhere. Gone, forgotten, lost in the annals of time, and that takes some doing because time and I are very old friends."

"What he's saying," Jack broke in, "is that you're not getting One. Single. Solitary. Child. The deal is off."

The Doctor pouted. "You went and stole my thunder, Jack."

"Sorry," he apologized without sounding remotely sincere. "Didn't want you getting sidetracked."
"You yielded in the past," the alien repeated. "You will do so again."

"The numbers were small enough in the past that the government's actions could be kept secret," Jack replied. "But this time that's not going to happen, because we've recorded everything. Everything that you've said, everything that the politicians have said. Those tapes will be released to the public and humanity will turn against you. When people find out the truth you will have six billion angry human beings taking up arms."

"But we're here to offer you a chance," the Doctor said. "A chance to leave this planet in peace, provided you never return. Because if you return, I will find out." His face darkened. "And if that happens, I will not be so kind as I am now."

The alien was silent, and when it spoke there was almost an air of amusement that colored its tone. "This is fascinating, isn't it? The human infant mortality rate is 29,158 deaths per day. A child dies every three seconds. The human response is to accept and adapt."

"Those deaths, while regrettable and mostly preventable, are not the results of a hostile alien force holding a planet at gunpoint," the Doctor said flatly. "Your actions will start a war, one that you may think that you can win." He leaned closer to the tank. "Get a history book an look me up. Find out what you're facing should you choose not to take my offer."

The silence stretched out for a long moment. "Then let the fight begin," the alien replied.

Jack glanced at the Doctor, who removed his hands from his pockets and seemed to grow several inches. "You are refusing my offer?" he asked carefully.

"Action has been taken," the alien stated. Alarms blared and lights flashed. Thames house was under lockdown.

"What have you done?" the Doctor demanded.

"You wanted a demonstration of war," the alien said. "A virus has been released. It will kill everyone in the building."

"I wanted to avoid the fighting!" the Doctor snapped. "I offered you a chance!"

"The building is designed to withstand biological or chemical attack," Frobisher said quietly. "No one can get in or out."

Mr. Green turned to Lois. "Happy now?" he asked cynically.

Rose sat in the TARDIS, frozen, her eyes locked on the screen in front of her. He was always nattering on about his superior Time Lord physiology, and now more than ever she hoped that he was right. He never got sick, never. Not even when she was laid up for a week with some nasty flu. He cheerfully brought her tea and soup and informed her smugly that nothing she could catch would hurt him. He didn't tell them he was an alien. Maybe they thought he was human. God, if he regenerated she was going to kill him. But—what if illness kept him from regenerating? What then? She would end it, that was what. She would call the Brigadier and tell him to blow them straight to hell. Rose closed her eyes and sent a prayer to whatever gods were listening. Please, let him be all right. Let him stop them. Although she had initially balked at remaining in the TARDIS, she was grateful he'd insisted. She had no intention of dying, not yet, anyway.
Jack bolted from the room. "The air is poisoned!" he yelled to a cluster of people standing outside the door. "Get someone to shut down the air conditioning! Get gas masks, hazard suits, oxygen cylinders!" They stared at him. "Get going!" They scattered.

A strange noise issued from the speakers. The Doctor covered his ears. His eyes were screwed shut in pain. It sounded unpleasant to Jack, but not debilitating. "What is it?" he asked the Time Lord. "What is it doing?"

Clement MacDonald clutched at his head. Pain blossomed in his skull, a pain that seemed to radiate out of him. Donna ran to him and grabbed at his arm.

"Clem, what's happening?" she asked. "Talk to me!"

He couldn't. Blood began to drip from his ears and his nose and he thrashed about. His mouth opened and he screamed. Blood dripped over his lips and he fell to the ground, writhing. Donna and Gwen knelt beside him.

"What's going on?" the Welsh woman asked.

Donna shook her head. "I don't know!" They tried to hold him down but he didn't stop screaming. Instead he got louder. The Brigadier told Rhys to keep the others out and closed the door. They didn't need to see what was happening.

"The remnant will be disconnected," the alien stated.

"Clem?" Jack asked. "What does that mean?"

"They're killing him," the Doctor said harshly. He straightened and removed his hands from his ears. The tightness of his lips betrayed discomfort, but not agony. "That's a psychic frequency. I'm sorry, Jack."

"For what?"

The Doctor did not look at him. "You'll start to feel the effects of the virus soon."

Jack shrugged. "I'll be back. Just—don't let me wake up in the morgue again. It gets old." The Doctor only nodded. When Jack's legs gave out he caught the man, and knelt, holding him. He laid his friend on the marble floor when his eyes rolled into the back of his head and his heart ceased to beat. The Doctor squeezed Jack's arm gently and then stood.

For a moment he was silent. His eyes were clear and his face was frighteningly blank. His hands hung loosely by his sides as he stared at the alien in front of him. "I am getting tired," he said finally, "of people killing my friends." His voice was calm and even, carefully controlled, but it radiated fury. If Rose, in her anger, had been fire, than he was ice personified. "I offered you a way out, a chance to leave this world without consequences." He walked forward until his nose was almost touching the glass. "You'll notice I'm not dying. Unlike the other people you murdered I'm not human. I'm the Doctor, the last of the Time Lords, and what happens next is on your head. Remember that you did this." He touched his hand to his ear. "Rose, we're ready."

The sound of the TARDIS materializing echoed through the room. The Doctor knelt, gathered up the body of Jack Harkness, and stepped through the door.
Donna continued to hold Clem down, although he'd stopped struggling. Gwen placed shaking fingers against his neck. Her eyes closed and she let her hand fall away.

"He's dead," she whispered.

Tears dripped down Donna's cheeks. "How? Why?"

Gwen shook her head and Rhys dropped to the floor behind her. He pulled her into a hug and she buried her face in his shirt. Donna straightened Clem's arms by his sides, and looked up at the Brigadier.

"We'd better get this out of sight," she said. "Can't let Steven see."

He nodded. "I'll take care of it." He pulled a blanket off of the couch and covered the body.

Rose stood silently by as the Doctor carried Jack into his old room and placed him gently on his bed. He turned from the corpse that was their friend and would be so again and an electric wind seemed to wash over her. His lips were pulled into a thin line and his eyes were impossibly large and so dark they appeared black in the soft light of the TARDIS. They seemed to pull all the warmth from the air, a pair of black holes in the starry sky. Power crackled along his skin. He held himself differently, straighter, more confident if that was possible. For all of his apparent humanity she was well aware that he was so much more.

She knew it, had always known it—and now she felt it. Like on the Titanic, he stood before her as a Time Lord, as a man who had been present at the formation of the Earth and its destruction, as the last member of an alien race which were the closest beings to gods as she'd ever seen. A millennia of knowledge and power seemed to settle around him. He commanded attention in the way of a lion or a wolf— with the fierce beauty of a deadly predator.

It should have terrified her. She knew that people fled from the Doctor when he turned that burning, ancient gaze on them. It did not. Every nerve in her body tingled with anticipation. Something within her, something ancient and powerful and angry stirred. She met his darkness with her own and she fought the urge to throw back her head and howl.

She felt like she did when she was a child, when she stood on the roof of the estate and stared down a thunderstorm. Lightning flashed and the air sizzled and thunder boomed around her and she laughed, delighted. She stood in storm with her arms outstretched as if she would embrace it. The wind whipped her hair and her clothes and she closed her eyes and let it roll over her, let the raw energy of nature fill her to the tips of her toes.

Something flared between them, something like understanding, and she stretched out her hand. He took it and they moved from the room to let Jack wake in peace. There was work to be done.

In nature there are no punishments and no rewards, only consequences
Jack Harkness's entire body convulsed as life surged through him. He gasped, eyes wide and staring and *god* that first breath hurt. It was like sandpaper against his throat and lungs. He choked a bit, but then his heart stopped trying to beat through his ribs and his muscles relaxed and he flopped back down onto—onto his bed. He blinked. He hadn't died in bed. He would have remembered that. No, he died in Thames house, which meant—it meant that the Doctor had kept his promise. Well, he supposed that the Doctor, more than anyone else, would understand how uncomfortable waking up in a morgue drawer was.

Jack was just outside his room when the TARDIS pitched and rolled. He grabbed for the wall but his fingers found no purchase on the smooth coral. He sighed as he braced for impact. At least he healed quickly—as in almost immediately. Thankfully the shocks were short-lived and he sustained only minor bruising. The TARDIS's hum shifted—they were out of the Vortex and parked somewhere. Hopefully Earth.

He shoved the door open, stepped into the console room, and froze. As a Time Agent, he was trained in the art of understanding body language. He could read people with almost perfect accuracy from a hundred feet away and five minutes of observation. If he knew the person well, he could do it from a hundred yards and with a glance. It was part natural gift and part extensive training, and it had saved his life more times than he could count. As a side effect it got him into more beds than he could count, let him say or be whatever the person wanted.

Jack Harkness knew the Doctor and Rose very well. He'd traveled with them for months and even though they had both changed since then he knew them. Something was wrong. Very wrong. Energy crackled against his skin and the hairs on his arms and the back of his neck were standing on end. The Doctor stood by the console with his back to Jack. His long coat lay on the jumpseat and Rose stood on his right. He turned when he heard the door close and Jack made the mistake of meeting his eyes.

There was one time, one time only, when he had seen the same combination of frozen grief and fury and madness that swirled in the Doctor's dark eyes. It was on Satellite five, or the gamestation, or whatever the hell they wanted to call it. He could hear it again, echoing cries of *Doctor!* and *Rose!* and then there was nothing left of her, nothing but a handful of dust and he'd screamed at the man with a gun who pulled the Doctor away from all that was left of the woman he loved. She'd been alive, but for a horrible hour he'd believed her to be dead and he'd been a man transformed.

Jack looked to Rose. She'd always been the Doctor's anchor, his lifeline, a tether to the world that kept him from getting swept away in the madness of his life and the cruelty of the universe. And this Doctor needed her even more than their first. Oh, he was an emotional see-saw, the Ninth Doctor, and he had his share of madness but this smiling man, oh, he lived so much closer to the edge. He flirted with it, all manic smiles and energy, he flirted with the darkness that dwelt within him. It was there, closer to the surface than it had been in centuries—he was just better at hiding it. She smiled at him fiercely, a lioness ready for the kill. Something in her eyes, something golden and timeless.
"What happened?" he asked, his voice rough from his recent reentry into the world of the living—or so he would claim. He refused to admit that he was, quite frankly, rather terrified of his best friends. Because he knew. Oh, he knew things he couldn't tell them, timelines and all, and they hadn't lived it, not yet. "Where are we?"

"Alistair's house," the Doctor replied. His voice was smooth and dangerous. "We have some aliens to stop."

Brian Green, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, leaned back in his chair. Footage from outside of Thames house took over the large TV in front of them. Images of men and women pounding on the thick glass doors, pressing against them until they slouched to the ground, overcome by the violence, flashed on the screen. Security officers took axes to the glass with little to no affect. It was designed to be impregnable—and it was.

"What do we do now?" he asked the men and women sitting around the table. They were silent. The horror of what they had just seen made speech seem somehow sacrilegious.

Finally Yeats spoke up. "We have to do it. We have to give them the children." No one protested and he continued. "They took out Thames house—it could be London next, or the entire UK, or the world."

Green nodded. "Bring in the army," he said shortly.

"Sir," Frobisher said, "the Doctor—he wasn't killed. There's still a chance—"

"Are you willing to bet your family's safety on that?" Green snapped.

"I think we should give him a chance, sir," he replied.

"They still have the recordings," Lois said. "And they'll use them. You'll go to jail, all of you."

Green shook his head. "I don't think so. Once the world understands what we're up against they'll thank us. After all—it could have been them, trapped in Thames house." He pressed a button on the intercom. "Sanders? Send security to Cabinet Office Briefing Room A. We've got a bit of a problem."

"You committed treason, Ms. Habiba," he said softly. "I hope it was worth those people's deaths."

Rose knew that she shouldn't want him so badly, not when he was like this, not when he was fire and ice and rage and the storm in the heart of the sun, but it was impossible for her to not. If the fate of the world wasn't hanging in the balance she would have had him right there—pulled him up against the console and Jack Harkness be damned. His eyes, his presence, the timbre of his voice sent shivers down her spine. They'd had hooray-we-survived sex and drive-out-the-nightmares sex and just-because sex and I-love-you-so-much sex, but right now, right now she wanted fire. She wanted to feel him burn against her from the inside out, to let him set her ablaze until only ashes and dust remained.

Later, his eyes said. Later. She would hold him to that.

"Why here?" Jack asked as they exited the TARDIS. The Doctor had parked the ship in Alistair's
This time the alien had even managed to leave the rose bushes intact. Doris would be thrilled, he thought idly.

"I need a child." His voice was clipped, stripped bare of his usual banter and cheer.

Jack froze. "A child? For what?" He grabbed the Doctor's arm. "Steven. What are you going to do to Steven, Doctor? He's my grandson!"

"No harm will come to him, Jack," the Doctor replied quietly. "I swear. I wanted to use Clem—to get the telepathic link from his mind, but they killed him. That frequency, if we can duplicate it, we can turn it against them."

The Brigadier was waiting for them just outside the door. "Something happened to Clem MacDonald," he told them. "He died screaming."

If possible the Doctor's eyes darkened further. "Sounds like it'll be poetic justice, then."

Gwen bolted through the door. "The children!" she yelled. "They're taking the children!"

The Prime Minister was on the telly. Rhiannon, Johnny, Misha, and David huddled on the couch in their living room. The other children hadn't arrived yet—probably wouldn't. The schools were opening again. She pulled Misha closer to her. They weren't going. Ianto said to keep the kids close, and she trusted him.

"Today we're taking steps to safeguard your children," Mr. Green was saying. "The schools are being opened again, and we urge you all to send your children back to their classes straight away. Government representatives will be visiting certain schools to discuss a series of inoculations."

"What's 'inoculations'?'" David asked.

"Injections," Rhiannon replied. She chewed on her thumbnail. The whole broadcast felt—off. He was too jumpy and his eyes kept flicking off to the side. She didn't trust him, not one bit.

"I don't want to go to school," David told her quietly.

"And you're not," she said. "You're staying put, just like your uncle Ianto said."

"But the man said we had to go," Misha piped up.

"And I know for a fact he's lying," she told her daughter.

"These inoculations are to protect your children," Mr. Green continued. "These inoculations are safe. These inoculations will guarantee no repeats of the problems of the past four days."

Rhiannon patted her son's leg. "David," she said. "On your feet. Go to the Baxter's, opposite, and then go to Sally's, and then go to Mrs. Sign. Tell 'em we'll have the kids, free of charge. Tell them that my brother works for the government, and he said it's not safe!"

They stood in the Brigadier's living room grouped around his television. "They said yes," Rose murmured. "Lois told me they said yes. They took the offer you made them."

"They lied," the Doctor grated out. "But it doesn't matter. I'll stop them, if I have to."

Ianto was pale. "My sister, she's got kids."
The Doctor looked around. "Anyone else?" There was silence. "Go," he said to Ianto. "Make sure they stay indoors. We can handle it from here. Rose?" She looked up at him. Her fingers were twined through his own. "Can you take him? I can't move the TARDIS, not until I've established the link."

She studied his face for a moment, and then nodded. Gwen raised her hand. "I'd like to come."

Rose considered for a moment and then checked the Canon. It was strapped to her wrist, as it always. "I've got enough power for three as long as we don't do too many unnecessary jumps. D'you have coordinates?" she asked Ianto.

He nodded, and rattled off a string of numbers. Jack blinked. He was the consummate boy scout, Ianto Jones. Always prepared.

Rose entered the numbers on the keypad. She turned to the Doctor, who didn't offer one of his usual manic grins. Instead, he regarded her seriously for a moment, before pulling her tightly to him and pressing his lips against hers. "See you soon," he murmured.

She gave him a smile with her tongue caught between her teeth. "Not if I see you first." She grabbed Ianto's hand and placed it on the Canon, and then put Gwen's over his. There was a flash like lightning without thunder and the three of them were gone.

Alistair raised an eyebrow but otherwise appeared unmoved by the Doctor's actions. He'd guessed that the two of them were close, the Doctor and Miss Tyler, but he hadn't realized how close. Indeed, he'd always believed that the alien simply didn't think of others in the same way that humans did—with romantic intentions. He'd been close with Sarah Jane and Jo Grant, but he had never hinted that there might be anything, well, physical about their relationship.

Donna stepped forward. "Doctor?" she asked hesitantly.

"Yes, Donna?" he replied.

"Clem," she said, and her voice hitched. "He's dead."

The Doctor hugged her. "I know," he said softly. "I'm sorry. If he'd been in the TARDIS I might have had a chance to stop it…"

"Not your fault," she told him.

He didn't refute her statement, but Alistair could tell that he wanted to. Some things, apparently didn't change, and the Doctor's god complex was one of them. He believed, honestly believed, that he could save everyone and when he couldn't he believed that he had killed them. It wasn't true, of course, but explaining that reality never seemed to help. He let Donna cling to him for a moment, but when she pulled back he turned to Alice and Steven. She stood in the back of the group with her arms resting protectively around her son. He moved to stand in front of them.

"I need your help," the Doctor said quietly.

Alice stared at him. "What do you mean?" Her grip on Steven tightened.

"I need to look inside your son's mind," he explained. "It won't hurt him—he probably won't even know I'm there, but I need to examine the telepathic link that the 456 used to communicate through the children."

"Why?" Rhys asked.
"They used it to kill Clem," he replied. "That's how he died. He had a link in place and they cut him off. They knew that he could hurt them." His voice was flat and empty. "I plan on doing so."

Gwen staggered as gravity reasserted itself on her body. Her stomach heaved and she fell to her knees, retching. Ianto was pale and shaking, but he managed to maintain his balance and keep his lunch where it belonged. Rose seemed unaffected. She held Gwen's hair away from her face as the woman spat.

"Taking three people makes shielding rough," she said softly. "The nausea will pass."

A door slammed open. "Ianto!" a woman cried. She shooed a small child back inside the house and ran towards the three strangers on her lawn. "You said you couldn't come here!" Rhiannon Davies said as she hugged him. "Is it over, then? Is it safe?"

He shook his head. "They're coming for the kids," he told her. "You can't stay here. We need to get you somewhere safe."

It was the work of a moment for the Doctor to reach into Steven Carter's mind and pull out the frequency of the telepathic link. He was gentle, as he promised Alice he would be. He kept his barriers firmly in place and shielded the boy from the riptides of his thoughts. It would not do for a child to be exposed to the darkness that seethed just below the surface of his being.

It took a bit longer to rig the TARDIS to broadcast at the necessary frequency, but Jack assisted him. Like so many things, it was better with two. The others stayed inside while the men tinkered beneath the console and adjusted various circuits. He wanted the signal to reach the 456, and only the 456.

He kept seeing Jenny's face, in his mind. As he twisted dials and tightened washers and adjusted the wiring he saw the bullet hit her in slow motion, saw her knees buckle, felt the warmth of her blood seeping through her shirt and coating his hands. She was his child, his child, and she'd been killed by a monster. He would not let that happen to anyone else, not today, not when he could prevent it. He knew how to cut the link, how to turn it against them. He was, after all, a telepathic being, and they'd sent a telepathic signal to kill Clem. His mind held its imprint. A bit of communion with the TARDIS and he'd have his weapon.

He'd offered them a choice. They'd refused. They'd killed innocent people. For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction: Newton's third law.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Jack asked. The Doctor stood with his hand resting lightly on a button that they'd wired into the control console. As soon as he pushed it the TARDIS would transmit the telepathic signal.

"Yes," he said softly, and pushed.

The strange, multi-tonal noise filled the TARDIS. It grated against Jack's ears and seemed to vibrate through his entire being. The Doctor stood impassively beside him, still pressing the button. The scanner blinked at them. There was an incoming message. The Doctor pressed a few buttons.


The Doctor remained unmoved. "I gave you a choice," he told them, and his voice could have frozen fire itself. "You chose this. You did this." He cut off the message and waited until the TARDIS beeped at him before he released the button. "They're dead," he told Jack, but there was no triumph
in his tone. He sounded weary—old. "The threat is over."

Alistair wanted them to stay, at least for tea, but the Doctor refused politely. "Work to do," he told the man with a small smile. "Planets to save, people to meet."

"You'll come back?" he pressed. "Doris would love for you to stay longer, and we really should catch up. It would be nice to see you when the world isn't ending."

"I'll make sure of it," Rose promised.

"It was lovely meeting you," Donna said.

"And you," he replied with a smile.

She turned back to face the other two and linked arms with Rose. "Right! This time, Doctor, I'll pick where we're going. Somewhere relaxing, I think, somewhere that isn't Cardiff."

Jack Harkness leaned over Mickey Smith's shoulder. "All done?"

Mickey nodded. "Just finished. I modified the subwave network Harriet Jones set up to transmit to anything with an internet connection." He paused. "Five minutes from now the whole world will know what happened in that conference room."

Jack straightened. "It would have been good to have you there. You and Martha both."

Mickey shrugged. "I wanted to, God did I want to, Jack, but I couldn't. Rose hadn't met me, and if she did now the timelines would go to hell."

He sighed. "I know."

They were silent for a moment, in the basement of Mickey and Martha's house. The hub was being rebuilt, but until it was finished Torchwood was officially homeless. He was lucky that Mickey had taken some bits and bobs home to upgrade his computer system. "Have you thought about my offer?" he asked finally.

Mickey nodded as he stared thoughtfully at the screen in front of him. "Yeah. Me an' Martha both. We've been freelancing for a while, and we think it would be nice to be part of a team again."

"Hello boys." A woman's voice drifted through the air and they both jumped. Jack turned, his hand on the gun at his hip. When he saw the intruder he let his hand fall and a smile spread across his face.

"Professor Song," he practically purred. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Mickey blinked. "River? What's going on?"

River Song put her hands on her hips and raised an eyebrow. "Captain Jack Harkness, the pleasure is all mine. Now, what have you done with my ship?"

Jack chuckled. "That's a long story."

"I've got time." She stalked over to stand in front of him. "Well, really I don't, but I'll make time. I've been traveling with this," she gestured to the vortex manipulator strapped to her wrist, "and I have to say that it's absolutely rubbish." Jack grumbled a bit. Apparently all time travelers had a thing against vortex manipulators. He never had a problem. Well, a big problem. Well, a big problem that he
couldn't turn to his advantage. "I need to find the Doctor," she continued, and then apparently she realized that Mickey was there. She stared at him. "I just left you," she said slowly, and then realization lit up her face. "I'm late."


She sighed. "Still, I'm getting closer." She flashed them a smile. "I'll see you later, boys, and Captain—I want my ship back." And then she was gone.

Mickey turned to Jack. "You stole her ship?"

A fond look flitted across the reformed con-man's face. "Chula warship, Mickey. It was a thing of beauty."

"Hold on," the other man said. "Rose told me that your ship got blown up the first time she met you."

Jack shrugged. "It did."

Mickey laughed. "I can't wait to see you tell that to her."

"I plan to be far away when I do," he said dryly. "Maybe a galaxy or three."

"I don't know about you two," Donna said after they were safely in the vortex, "but I'm knackered. Think I'll have a shower and then head off to bed." The Doctor didn't appear to have heard, but Rose gave her a smile and a nod.

"Thanks," she said, and hugged the ginger woman. "I'm sorry about Clem."

"Yeah," Donna replied softly. "See you tomorrow."

"G'night," Rose replied.

She waited until Donna was safely through the door and down the hall before she moved closer to the Doctor. He was fiddling absently with the controls as he stared at the door. His eyes were glassy and unfocused. He looked like he was a million miles away. Maybe he was. She could almost feel the tension pouring off of him. He was always wound tight, but now he was like a bowstring, begging for release.

She thought she knew how he felt. Her muscles fairly vibrated with energy. She couldn't settle down, couldn't stay still, and she knew that trying to sleep in that state was an exercise in futility. A thousand emotions crawled beneath her skin: fear, hatred, anger, relief, triumph, satisfaction-need. Raw, aching need. She slid her hand over his, and then up his arm, over his shoulder, to cup the back of his neck. He turned to face her, his eyes dark pools of want and power. Her other hand grabbed his lapel and she pulled him down into a blazing kiss. His arms came around her, pulled her flush against his body as he battled for control of the kiss. He broke it off and grabbed her hand.

"Run," he said roughly, and they ran down the corridors of the TARDIS. He pulled her along, twisting and turning and leading her to an unfamiliar door. They ducked inside and it had barely closed when he shoved her against the cool wood.

It was fast and hard and not at all like the other times. She didn't need to chase away nightmares, to know that he loved her with every atom of his existence. She needed the door against her back and
his hands beneath her arse just like he needed her nails against his skin and her legs around his waist. She needed release, an outlet for the emotions of the past few days. He needed to feel something that wasn't pain and horror and despair. It was fucking, not making love and hardly sex.

Gentleness came later, when they were lying, sated and exhausted, on the soft cotton sheets of his bed. He stroked her back and she cradled him close to her body. He pressed a kiss to her forehead as she drifted into sleep. They were alive, and they were together, and he'd be damned if anything in the universe tried to change that.
Agatha Christie and a Party

Rose yawned and stretched. She felt good. Well, she was a bit sore, but that was to be expected after their activities the night before. She shifted and her hand hit something solid. Cool fingers laced through her own. She opened her eyes. The Doctor was lying on the bed next to her, looking rather bored and thoroughly shagged.

"Hello," she said softly.

He smiled at her, the slow spread of lips that was so different from the tight smile that meant 'I'm-totally-fine-but-not-really' and his usual manic grin. It was for her and only her and she could feel warmth bubbling up from the soles of her feet all the way to the tip of her nose. "Hello," he replied. "You've been asleep for ages."

She brought her wrist out from under the pillow, glanced at the watch that remained attached to it, and then rolled her eyes. "Eight and a half hours is hardly ages, Doctor." Her tone was dry, but the tongue-touched smile she gave him took the bite out of her words.

He brought their joined hands to his lips and brushed a kiss against her knuckles. "It is when you're Time Lord and you don't need sleep," he informed her. "Donna's already up."

Rose cocked an eyebrow as she looked him up and down. "Go out to the kitchen like that, then?" He was stark naked.

He glared at her in mock-outrage. "Are you trying to get me to regenerate? Because I would, you know, whether out of embarrassment or from the slap she'd give me, I'm not sure, but it would happen."

Rose laughed as she released his hand and swung her feet over the side of the bed. She was loath to leave it—the blankets were warm and soft and seemed to mold to fit her. But, she needed a shower and a change of clothes if they were to start the day, and she wouldn't get those things in the Doctor's room.

It was nice, waking up here. Previously he'd been the one coming to her, usually after she'd already gone to bed, but sometimes before. Her room was (mostly) the way she'd left it, although the TARDIS had done her a favor and seriously toned down the pink. When she'd first stepped into her room it was like something vomited pink everywhere. Sure, she'd loved it when she was twenty, but at two-hundred and four she was a bit beyond neon colors. It was a bit more pastel currently and the walls were a soothing shade of green.

The Doctor's room wasn't quite how she had imagined it, but it suited him. The furniture was simple but not as severe as it had been with her first Doctor. The bed was luxurious and the covers were the same deep blue as the walls. There was no ceiling; instead a projection of the night sky, any night sky, hovered above their heads. The furniture was made from some kind of dark wood and every available surface was covered with bits and bobs of machinery. It seemed that in any body he loved to tinker. The carpet was blue and thick and soft. It was a delightfully tactile room. She'd slept in it once before, just after she'd arrived—when she told the Doctor about Torchwood and what they'd done to her.

Rose gathered her clothes and started dressing. The Doctor pouted. She rolled her eyes. "Can't go wearing the same thing two days in a row," she told him. "An' unless you're hiding some of my clothes in that closet I've got to go back to my room. And in order to get to my room, I've got to get
dressed."

"I could, you know," he said softly.

She blinked at him. "What?"

"I could have some of your clothes in my closet," he replied. "I was thinking that maybe, if you wanted to, you could sleep here. Unless, of course, you'd be uncomfortable, which is fine," he continued, mistaking her amused silence for judgment. "If you need your space there's no reason you can't—"

She silenced him with a finger pressed against his lips. He kissed it absently, his eyes focused on hers. "Are you asking me to share a room with you?" He glanced down at her finger and she removed it.

"Well, yes," he said after a while, and scratched the back of his neck. "I just—rather like having you here, and this bed is much larger and more comfortable than the one you've got, and Donna's my mate but she's entirely too smug when she runs into me in the hallway outside your door."

Rose paused for a moment, and then slipped her trainers on, laces still tied. "Okay," she told him.

It was his turn to blink. "Just, okay? That's it?"

"Yeah." She shrugged. "I wasn't sure that you'd want to, you know, share a room. You've always been so—private, about that sort of thing."

"I don't usually let companions into my room," he admitted. "But then, you stopped being a companion a long time ago." He glanced around the room. "Where did my trousers get to? And my tie?"

Rose laughed. "M not sure. Was a bit busy."

He nodded. "Oh, yes we were." He pushed off the bed and wandered around the room, collecting various articles of clothing from their respective locations. His trousers were next to the dresser, as it turned out, and his tie was half-way to the ensuite.

Rose sighed and closed her eyes as warm water sprayed against her back. The Doctor had followed her to her room, of course, and she'd had to practically drive him out of the shower. It was a pleasant thought, bathing with him, and it chased away other, less pleasant things she wasn't going to think about yet, but it wasn't conducive to starting the day and they still had two stops to make.

What are you going to do?

D'you remember that telepath? The one that Torchwood brought in?

Yeah.

I'm going to do that. Psychic overload.

She died screaming.

They killed dozens of innocent people, and are poised to abduct millions of children with the government's cooperation.

There was silence.
I gave them a chance.

I know.

But she wasn't going to think about that at the moment. She wasn't going to remember how it felt to watch the telepath die as her mind burned from the inside out. They had work to do and there would be time later for recriminations and guilt.

Donna and the Doctor were waiting for her in the kitchen when Rose emerged, freshly scrubbed. Breakfast was apparently over, but they waited until she'd eaten a bagel and downed a glass of orange juice.

"I know where I want to go after this," Donna said, when the dishes were in the sink and they were in the console room, waiting for the Doctor to take them out of the Vortex. "You've met Charles Dickens, and Martha got to meet Shakespeare. I want to see Agatha Christie." She looked at the Doctor. "What do you say, spaceman? Agatha Christie and a party? Could use a drink after the past few days."

The Doctor shuddered. "Donna Noble, I never want to see you drunk. But Agatha Christie is brilliant! A regular detective, she is. Notices everything."

"Is that a yes, then?" Rose asked from across the control console.

The Doctor grinned. "Agatha Christie and a party it is! Just have a run a few errands, and then you two can nip off to the wardrobe and find something historically appropriate to wear."

"Will there be running for our lives?" Rose wanted to know. "Don't want to risk spraining an ankle in one of my nice shoes."

"I'll do my best," the Doctor promised. "Now, allons-y!"

Their first stop was Lois Habiba's cell. Rose wasn't sure if they were stupid or just lazy, because they'd stuck her in a cell right next to where Alice and Steven and Ianto and Gwen had been held—and promptly rescued from. Of course, it could just be that whoever was in charge of allocating prisoners simply didn't believe them to be a threat. The thought brought a predatory smile to her face. How wrong they were.

The rescue went off without a hitch and Lois got over the shock of being in an alien craft that was bigger on the inside relatively quickly. "Don't think I have enough energy to be scared," she told them. "I used it all up being terrified earlier." They dropped her off in Cardiff, with Jack.

"The government will be looking for her for a little while," the Doctor explained, "and I'd like to have her somewhere they can't reach. Plus, I think Gwen offered her a job."

"She did," Rose confirmed.

"In that case, next stop coming up!" The Doctor flipped a switch and threw a lever and they were off again.

Brian Green, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland closed his office door with a sigh of relief. He rested his head against the cool wood of the door and took a moment just to breathe. The past few days had been a nightmare. They'd had riots in the streets
earlier, because the aliens were gone but of course no one knew until an hour or so later, so they went ahead with the plan and collected the three hundred and twenty-five thousand children. By the time they knew what had happened the country was in an uproar. It was a publicity nightmare. He chuckled to himself—it was one he could blame on John Frobisher. There was a reason he'd agreed not to meet the aliens. He'd had no direct contact with them, after all. Everything that happened could be fobbed off on a flunky, and he could claim to have sorted it all, might even get elected to another term.

He turned around to head toward his desk, and froze. There were people in his office. Three people, to be exact. There was that girl—Rose something—Tyler, that was it, Rose Tyler. She stood next to a tall man in a long brown coat. His brown hair was wild, a look that either meant he spent an absurdly long amount of time on it or constantly suffered from severe bed-head. A ginger woman stood on his other side and she was glaring at him.

It was the man, however, that frightened him. His posture was relaxed—open, even—as he held the Tyler girl's hand, but his eyes were flat and empty. "Hello Prime Minister," he said softly.

"What are you doing here?" Green sputtered. How had they gotten in without being seen? His secretary hadn't seen anyone. Was she in on it? Did they bribe her?

The ginger woman snorted. "He's a Time Lord. He's got a TARDIS and it can go almost anywhere."

"We had a deal," the man called the Doctor continued in that same soft, dangerous tone. "I gave you a chance. That deal is off. You threw Ms. Habiba in prison and you sent men with guns to pull children from their homes." He paused. "Turn on the telly in about five minutes. I hear there's going to be something interesting on." He turned and strode to the corner, followed by the blonde and the ginger woman. Green blinked. There was a box, a big blue box sitting in the corner of his office and he hadn't even noticed. The door swung open and then slammed shut.

A wind seemed to come from nowhere. It scattered papers and other small items across his office as a strange grinding moan filled the air. Mr. Green stared at the corner as the box faded from sight.

Five minutes later there was a knock on the door. "Mr. Prime Minister," his secretary said. "You'll want to turn on the telly, sir."

The Doctor knocked on the Wardrobe room's door. "Rose?" he called. "Donna? We're going to be late for the party!"

"Time Machine!" the two women yelled in concert.

"I can't just go hopping about in the timeline, you know!" he replied. "I told you that before, Rose. We've landed and now we're part of events, so if you two don't hurry up we'll miss cocktails on the lawn!"

"Aren't you going to change?" Rose's voice drifted out to the hall.

"Why mess with perfection?" he asked and preened a bit.

"You're not vain at all," she replied, and he could hear the smile in her voice. Good. He wanted her to be smiling, to think about drinks and dancing and dancing and not running for her life for a bit. The past few days had been rough, even by his standards, and blimey, had it only been days since Messaline? No, he wasn't going to think about that, he told himself he wouldn't; he was going to focus on the present and enjoy meeting Agatha Christie at a party.
Donna was done getting ready first, of course. She exited the wardrobe and twirled around once. "What do you think?" she asked him. "Flapper, or slap 'er?" The dress was a classic 1920's style. It was black with a high neckline and thick straps. It was also heavily embroidered in various dark shades of brown and green. It had a cape back that ended an inch below the rest of the dress. The olive green threads brought out her eyes and complimented her skin.

"Suits you," he told her. "Definitely a flapper. And nice necklace."

She stood a bit straighter. "Thanks. TARDIS suggested it."

"She's a dimensionally transcendent space and time ship, and you've got her making wardrobe suggestions," he grumbled.

The door opened and Rose stepped out. "She may be all that," she said, "but she's also a girl, and girls like to do girly things sometimes, like dress up." The Doctor didn't respond—he was too busy looking at her.

Donna grinned slyly. "Think he likes the dress, Rose."

Rose smiled at him, the tip of her tongue caught between her teeth. "Cat got your tongue, Doctor?" she asked archly.

"Oh, never, Rose Tyler," he replied with one of his slow, spreading smiles. "You look beautiful." Rose's dress was ivory and longer than Donna's, which ended a few inches below the ginger woman's knees. Teardrop designs in gold and silver thread covered the bodice, with its high neck and back and open sides. An undershirt of the same material kept it from being too revealing. There was a tie at the waist and the fabric draped over it enough to call attention to Rose's figure without being too obvious. The hem swept the floor. It was an elegant dress, decorative enough that she had decided to go without a necklace. Instead several thin, golden bracelets decorated each wrist and golden studs glistened on her earlobes. Her hair, like Donna's, was pulled into an elaborate updo and held in place by a beaded string that wove through the knot. She was stunning, he thought, but then again, she always was.

"Beautiful for a human?" she asked with a raised eyebrow.

"For anything," he replied sincerely.

"All right you two, break it up," Donna teased them. "We've got a party waiting for us!" She threw open the doors and stepped out onto the lawn. "Let's go meet Agatha Christie!"
The Doctor strode confidently out on the lawn. Rose was beside him, her arm linked with his and Donna followed closely behind. Rose had given her the second psychic paper so that she would have her own invitation. Small wooden tables and wicker-backed chairs were scattered over the closely-cut grass. There was a longer table in the shade, a buffet, and white-gloved servants bustled about, laying out dishes and putting last minute touches on everything. Rose worried the plain gold band she now wore around her ring finger on her left hand. Just in case, the Doctor said. She was his wife for the day and he wanted to keep people from getting suspicious. Donna, of course, thought they should just get married already. Apparently they acted like a married couple—all they needed was a slip of paper to formalize things.

Rose wouldn't have objected, but she felt no need to rush into things. The Doctor didn't do domestic, and what they had was far too complicated for any sort of human marriage ceremony. What did his people do, she wondered, when they got married? Did they get married? She hesitated to ask. They were having a good time, a day out. It would be a pity to ruin the mood.

"Hello there!" the Doctor called jovially.

One of the serving-men stepped forward to meet them. "Drinks, sir? Ma'am? Ma'am?" he asked.

"Sidecar for me, please," Donna said.

"I'll have a lime and soda, thanks," replied the Doctor.

Rose hesitated. "Mary Pickford, please." The man nodded politely and bustled away.

Another man, also in white gloves but with much nicer clothes, stepped forward. "May I announce Lady Clemency Eddison," he proclaimed. Lady Eddison was an older, blond woman. She wore an elegant, deep blue dress with a gauzy jacket of the same shade. Long, beaded necklaces hung down almost to her stomach, as was the fashion. Her hair was pinned up in a reserved but fashionable bun at the back of her neck.

The Doctor clasped her hand in his. "Lady Eddison," he said expansively.

She returned his handshake, but seemed puzzled. "Forgive me," she said, "but who might you be? And what are you doing here?"

The Doctor reached into his jacket and pulled out the psychic paper. He held it out to her. "I'm the Doctor and this is my wife, Rose Tyler. We were thrilled to receive your invitation, milady." He gave her a dazzling smile, the one he knew could charm a rock, or anyone but Jackie Tyler. "We met at the Ambassador's reception. Me, Rose, and our friend Donna Noble, of the Chiswick Nobles."

"Oh, how could I forget you, Doctor Tyler?" Lady Eddison asked. Confidence, the Doctor always said, was key. "And Mrs. Tyler, and of course Miss Noble. But one must be sure, what with the Unicorn on the loose," she said confidentially.
The Doctor immediately perked up. "There's a unicorn? Brilliant! Where?"

Lady Eddison regarded him strangely for a moment. "The Unicorn is a jewel thief, Doctor. Surely you've read about him in the papers? Nobody knows who he is. He's just struck again." A serving-man brought out their cocktails. "Snatched Lady Babbington's pearls from under her nose."

Rose sipped her drink. It was just right—not too sweet. She thought that perhaps the Lady Eddison had already been indulging. She seemed—looser as time went on, still proper but less uptight.

The butler stepped forward again. "May I announce Colonel Hugh Curbishley and the Honorable Roger Curbishley."

"Doesn't much sound like a question," Rose muttered as a handsome young man pushed an older man in a wheelchair towards them.

"My husband," Lady Eddison explained, "and my son." The Colonel kissed her hand and she smiled at him.

"Forgive me for not rising," he said with a self-depreciating smile. "Never been the same, since that flu epidemic back in '18."

"My word," Roger said as he looked with apparent admiration at Donna and Rose. "You are a pair of super ladies!"

Donna smiled at him and let him take her hand. "I like the cut of your jib, chin-chin," she said coyly. Rose had to fight not to laugh. Was all slang this ridiculous when viewed from the outside?

The Doctor shook Roger's hand. "Hello!" he said brightly. "I'm the Doctor, and this is my wife, Rose."

Roger took Rose's hand as well, and then a young man in a serving uniform brought him a drink. "Your usual, sir," the man said.

He took the glass and watched the young man with slightly hooded eyes. "Ah, thank you Davenport. Just how I like it." He managed to take a sip suggestively, a feat that was almost worthy of Jack, Rose thought.

"How come she's an Eddison," Donna asked quietly, "but her husband and son are Curbishleys?"

The Doctor sipped his drink and watched Lady Eddison and her husband interact. They seemed happy, although it could have been just for show. "The Eddison title ascends through her," he explained. "One day Roger will be a lord."

Two more guests were introduced: a Miss Robina Redmond, who was apparently the hit of the social scene, and Reverend Arnold Golightly, an old friend of the family. "I heard that some local ruffians broke into your church," Lady Eddison remarked as she led the Reverend over to mingle with the others.

"You apprehended them, the papers said," the Colonel agreed.

The Reverend, a man who looked to be about forty years old merely said mildly that "as the Christian fathers taught me, we must forgive them their trespasses, literally."

Roger spoke up. "Some of these young boys deserve a decent thrashing."
Davenport returned with another drink. "Couldn't agree more, sir," he replied and took Roger's empty glass.

They shared another long look and Donna sighed. "Typical—all the decent men are on the other bus," she said and drained the last of her cocktail.

"Or Time Lords," the Doctor remarked.

"And taken!" she shot back at him. "Doctor Tyler."

The Doctor rolled his eyes but Rose hugged his arm and his irritation vanished. "It's a good name," he said. "Rose Smith just doesn't have the same ring to it as Rose Tyler."

"Now, Milady," the Reverend asked. "What about this special guest you promised us?"

Lady Eddison glanced towards the house and smiled. "Here she is!" She walked forward to meet a tall blond woman. The newcomer had shortish hair that was styled in fashionable waves and wore a flowing blue and gold gown. "A lady who needs no introduction!" The guests began to clap and Rose, the Doctor, and Donna joined in.

"Is that her?" Donna asked in a whisper. "Is that Agatha Christie?" The Doctor nodded. Donna beamed. "I've read all of her books! They're brilliant!"

"Thank you, Lady Eddison," Agatha replied, looking a bit embarrassed, "but there's no need. Honestly, there's no need." She held out her hand to Donna. "Agatha Christie."

"Donna Noble," she replied with a blinding smile. "It's so nice to meet you."

"And I'm the Doctor," he held out his hand when Agatha released Donna's. "Brilliant to meet you, Mrs. Christie. I was just told about you the other day. I love your stuff," he gushed. Rose stood back a bit and watched the two of them. She'd never been much for mysteries, not until she was trapped in Pete's World, but Donna and the Doctor were clearly fans. Well, Donna was. The Doctor was a fan of just about every major historical and literary figure—and he'd met most of them. Apparently he hadn't yet met her. "What a mind! You fool me every time," he continued. "Well—almost every time. Well, once or twice—well, once, but it was a good once!"

Donna elbowed him. "Babbling again, Doctor," she said.

Agatha Christie was watching them with a look of amused interest. "You make a rather unusual couple," she observed.

The Doctor stepped away from Donna, who was shaking her head vigorously. "We're not married," he said quickly.

"No, no we're not a couple," Donna continued. Rose hid a smile with her hand.

"Obviously," Agatha commented with a sly look. "You're not wearing a wedding ring, Ms. Noble." Donna glanced at her hand and grinned. "I would stay that way, if I were you," she told Donna. "The thrill is in the chase, never in the capture." Agatha turned to Rose. "I presume this is your wife, sir?"

"That she is," he replied, and the boyish enthusiasm was replaced with fond warmth. He laced his fingers through hers.

Rose smiled at Agatha and shook her hand. "Rose Tyler, and it's fantastic to meet you. Don't mind
"the Doctor, he's a bit excitable."

"I'm hurt, Rose," he protested in a tone that was verging on a pout. "Struck to the core."

She laughed and rolled her eyes and she bumped his shoulder with her own. "Sure you are."

Lady Eddison led Agatha Christie toward the rest of the party. "I'm so glad you could come, Mrs. Christie. I'm one of your greatest followers. I've read all six of your books." She paused. "Will Mr. Christie be joining us?"

Agatha blinked. "Is he needed?" she asked, just a bit sharply. "Can't a woman make her own way in the world?"

"I've found," the Doctor said quietly, "that if a determined woman wants to do something, it isn't wise to stand in her way."

"Well, don't go giving my wife ideas," the Colonel remarked lightly and the guests laughed. Discussion turned to her books, and the Doctor borrowed the Colonel's newspaper. He knew what decade they were in, but the exact date escaped him. He'd told the TARDIS to find Agatha Christie at a party and let her pick when and where.

"Where on Earth is professor Peach?" Roger inquired. "He'd love to meet Mrs. Christie!"

"I believe he said he was going to the library," the Reverend responded. "We arrived at the same time." Someone was sent to fetch the professor and the Doctor rejoined Donna and Rose. His eyebrows were pulled together in a way that Rose knew meant trouble.

"What is it?" she asked.

He gestured to the paper. "Look at the date."

Donna was frowning as well, but in confusion. "What about it?"

"It's the day Agatha Christie disappeared," he replied. "She'd just discovered her husband was having an affair."

Donna stared at him and Rose glanced over to the woman, who was chatting with Roger and the Reverend. She appeared relaxed and happy, not at all like she had been when she'd found out that Jimmy had been sleeping around, or even how she'd appeared when Mickey told her he was seeing Trisha Delaney. "You'd never know it to look at her," Donna said, voicing Rose's thoughts. "Smiling away."

The Doctor shrugged. "She's British and moneyed—that's what they do, they 'carry on.'" He affected a posh accent. "Except for this one time," he continued in his normal voice. "No one knows exactly what happened, she just vanished. Her car will be found tomorrow morning by the side of a lake, and ten days later she turns up in a Hotel in Harrogate. Said she'd lost her memory. She never spoke about the disappearance, not till the day she died." He shrugged.

"But whatever it was," Rose said slowly, "it's about to happen."

"Right here, right now," the Doctor agreed.

The servant who was sent to fetch the professor, an Indian woman by the name of Ms. Chandrakala, burst through the door and out onto the lawn. "The professor!" she screamed. "In the library! Murder, murder!"
The Doctor was first on the scene, followed by Rose, Donna, and Agatha Christie. Constantly running for their lives left the time travelers a bit more fit than the other guests, who trained only for fun (or to keep their girlish figures). The professor lay on his stomach, his arms spread wide as if he had fallen whilst standing. A length of pipe lay next to him and a bloody contusion covered the back of his bald head. "Bashed on the head," the Doctor noted as he whipped out his brainy specs and knelt next to the body. "Blunt instrument. That pipe would do it." He checked the man's arms. "Watch broke when he fell—time of death was quarter past four." He stood abruptly and began rifling through the papers on a nearby desk.

"Oh my goodness!" the butler exclaimed as he arrived with the remainder of the guests.

Rose stood and moved to stand in front of the door. "Wouldn't want the ladies to see this sort of thing, would we?" she asked him quietly. "Just let the Doctor work, he's good at solving mysteries."

Something caught the corner of Agatha's eye. She glanced at the fireplace and noted a scrap of unburnt paper that had apparently been attached to a larger document—one that had ended up in the fireplace. Innocent people did not burn documents, she knew. She slipped the paper into her purse, unaware that the Doctor was watching.

"Nothing worth killing for in that lot," the noted and set the papers back down. "Dry as dust."

"The body in the library?" Donna asked softly as she left her post next to professor Peach's corpse. "Professor peach in the library with the pipe?" The Doctor said nothing, but cocked an eyebrow at her.

"Someone should call the police!" Lady Eddison asserted. She stood in the doorway just beyond Rose, who was still blocking the entrance.

"You don't have to," the Doctor replied. He held his psychic paper out to them. "Chief Inspector Tyler from Scotland Yard, nicknamed 'the Doctor.'" He glanced at Donna. "Ms. Noble is the plucky young girl who helps me out."

"You don't want to see him like this, Milady," she told the older woman. "It's never pleasant."

"You seem quite at home, Mrs. Tyler," Agatha observed.

"The life of a policeman's wife," she replied with a sad smile. "It's not the first dead body I've seen, and hardly the most gruesome." The other woman looked like she wanted to say more, but refrained.

"Mrs. Christie was right," the Doctor continued. "Go into the sitting room and I will question each of you in turn."

Agatha led the way out. "Come along," she instructed, and they responded to the authority in her voice. "Do as the Doctor instructed. We must leave the room undisturbed."

"Plucky young girl who helps me out?" Donna objected when the others had gone.

"No policewomen in 1926," the Doctor replied as he laid on the floor to examine some kind of viscous liquid. There was a drop, just a drop, next to the body on the smooth, dark wood of the floor. "And Rose is my wife, so it was either 'plucky sidekick' or 'secretary,' and I don't have anything that needs typing right now, thanks."

"I'll pluck you in a moment," she muttered. "Why don't we phone the real police?"
"Well," the Doctor said as he pulled what looked like a dissecting probe out of his pocket and scraped at a drop of dark liquid on the floor. "Last thing we want is P.C. Plod sticking his nose in, especially now that I've found this."

Rose left her position by the door and hunkered down next to him. "What is it?" she asked.

"Morphic residue," he replied.

Donna snorted. "Doesn't sound very 1926."

"It's not," the Doctor said as he pushed himself off the floor. "It gets left behind when certain species genetically re-encode."

"What?" Donna gave him a long, steady look.

"When they switch forms," he clarified.

"So, the murderer is an alien." Rose stated.

"Yep!" the Doctor replied. "And at least one of the people out there is an alien in human form."

"Think about it, Doctor," Donna broke in. "There's a murder, a mystery, and Agatha Christie."

He blinked at her, confused. "So?" he asked as he sniffed the residue. "Happens to me all the time."

Donna rolled her eyes. "Yeah, but isn't that a bit weird? Agatha Christie wasn't surrounded by murders, not in real life anyway. That would be like meeting Charles Dickens surrounded by ghosts on Christmas Eve!"

Rose and the Doctor both froze. "Well," he began hesitantly, "there was that one time—"

"Oh," Donna said. "You are kidding me. That's how you met Charles Dickens? Could we drive cross country and find Enid Blyton having tea with Noddy?" The Doctor didn't respond, as he was too busy tasting the residue. Apparently scent didn't supply enough information. "Noddy's not real—is he?" Still no response. The Doctor was glancing around the room, apparently not paying attention. "Tell me there's no Noddy," Donna insisted.

The Doctor rolled his eyes and placed his hands firmly on her shoulders. "There is no Noddy," he said with just a little heat. "Come on, Rose."

Donna followed them out. "Next thing you'll be tellin' me is that it's like Murder on the Orient Express and they all did it."

Agatha was waiting for them I a doorway just outside. "Murder on the Orient Express?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah," Donna replied brightly. "One of your best."

"But, not yet," the Doctor hinted, and elbowed her.

"Marvelous idea, though," Christie mused.


"Anyway," he said in an attempt to bring the conversation back to its original purpose. "Agatha and I will question the suspects. Donna, you search the bedrooms and look for clues and any more
residue." He handed her a large magnifying glass with a cheeky grin. "You'll need this."

It was her turn to glare at him. "Are you serious?"

"Go on," he told her, his face blank but she could see the corners of his mouth twitching in an effort not to smile. "You're ever so plucky." She took the instrument and with a huff and a final glare climbed the staircase that led to the bedrooms.

"What do you want me to do?" Rose asked, her hand still in his.

"Watch them," he told her. "In the sitting room. See how the interact as a group when I'm not around. This is a rather conservative crowd, after all, and they'll likely underestimate you."

She threw up a mock salute. "Righto sarge." And then she headed off to the sitting room.

Agatha was regarding him strangely. "Your wife helps you solve murders?"

"Rose is clever," he told her, "and very observant, and she's good with people. They underestimate her because she's pretty and doesn't have a fancy accent." He smiled. "Their mistake. Now!" He rocked on the balls of his feet and grinned at her. "Solving a murder mystery with Agatha Christie—brilliant."

She frowned at him. "How like a man to have fun while there's disaster all around him."

The Doctor's face fell. "Sorry, yeah."

"I'll work with you, gladly," she continued, "but for the sake of justice and not your own amusement." She brushed past him toward the study and he followed, wincing. Oh, this body was good at putting his foot in his mouth. If Rose were here she'd make some comment about his flexibility, but it was true, what he'd said on the Sycorax ship. He was rude and not ginger.

They questioned each guest and family member and discovered that none of them had an alibi.

"The secret adversary remains hidden," Agatha noted as they paced in the study. "We must look for a motive." She paused. "We must use 'the little gray cells.'"

The Doctor nodded as he flopped down in the armchair across from Agatha. "Good old Poirot."

She paused. "For such an experienced detective, you missed a fairly large clue."

A corner of his mouth tugged upwards in a small smile. "You mean that bit of paper you found in the fireplace."

"You were looking the other way!" she protested.

"Yeah, but I saw you reflected in the glass of the bookcase," he pointed out rather smugly. A genuine smile slipped across her face, and when she looked at him he could see a new respect. "You crafty man," she acknowledged, apparently delighted by his cleverness. There were two kinds of brilliant people, he knew: those who appreciated brilliance in others and those who preferred to be a big fish in a little pond. He was glad that she was the first kind and not the second—they were usually rather unpleasant, as Luke Rattigan had been. "This is all that was left," she continued, and pulled out the tiny scrap of paper. He set his teacup down on a low table and joined her by the fireplace.
"Is that an 'M' or an 'N'?" he asked as he donned his spectacles.

"It is an 'M,'" Agatha replied. "The word is Maiden."

"Maiden, of course!" he yelled and she jumped. Then he paused. "But what does that mean?"

She sighed. "We're still no further forward. Our nemesis remains at large, unless Miss Noble or Mrs. Tyler have found something."

If it was possible to die of boredom, Rose was fairly certain that she was on her way. It was like being at one of Pete's Vitex functions—without Mickey or Jake to keep her from tearing her hair out, or being able to talk about anything that she was remotely interested in. Mickey—god, Mickey. The list of people she'd killed kept getting longer, and his was one of the names that caused her the most pain. He'd insisted on trying out the prototype of the Dimension Canon. She wanted to go, but he threatened to handcuff her to a chair and lock her in a closet and she knew that he'd do it. So she let him go, and he didn't come back.

She tuned out most of what the guests were saying. It was a skill she'd first learned at Torchwood. She kept her ears open, so to speak, for certain words and let the majority of conversation wash over her. She watched them, looking for any hint of guilt or discomfort. Everyone was disturbed, but other than general unease she couldn't pick up any strong emotions.

Left to its own devices, her mind turned inward. She was late. It was only a couple days, but she was so regular. She'd gotten her period with the Doctor, so it wasn't that she was readjusting to their more strenuous lifestyle. Could she—no, he said they couldn't. Said Time Lords were sterile and had been for centuries. Before, he said, maybe they could have had children, but very few of his people even traveled to Earth, let alone fraternized with humans.

She wanted to give him children, to give him something of herself to have when she died. If her current aging was anything to go by she had centuries at least, possibly millennia before she died of old age, but she doubted that she would make it that far. She wanted him to not be alone anymore. If Jenny had lived he would have had someone, but she hadn't, and one day he would be alone again. It hurt her heart to think of him wandering the stars without her. She didn't want to leave him, not ever.

The sound of screams brought her to her feet.

Donna leaned up against the door for support. Her eyes were wide and her face was ashen. She was panting for breath. The Doctor and Agatha reached her first, with Rose darting up the stairs a few seconds later.

"It's a giant wasp!" the ginger woman told them.

The Doctor frowned. "What do you mean, a giant wasp?"

Donna stared at him like he was being exceptionally thick. "I mean a wasp that's giant!" she yelled.

Agatha rolled her eyes. "It's only a silly little insect."

"When I say 'giant,'" Donna told her, "I don't mean big. I mean flippin' enormous!" She pointed to a thick, black stick that had smashed through the bottom panel of the door. "Look at its sting!" Said sting was a little thicker than Rose's wrist at the base and ended in a vicious point. It was also about as long as her forearm. She stared at it in shock.
"That's one big bug," she muttered to the Doctor.

"Let me see it," he commanded and pulled open the door. The room was empty. "It's gone," he said. "Buzzed off."

Rose groaned. "You and your puns." He flashed her a cheeky grin. She looked around. Dust covered the dresser and nightstand and the surfaces were bare, except for a bed. A teddy bear sat on worn, faded covers. "What is this place?" she asked Donna.

"Leftover from when Lady Eddison came back from India," Donna told her. "Or at least, that's what the butler said. Apparently she had malaria, and quarantined herself in this room. No one's been in here since, well, not until today."

Agatha was intrigued by the sting embedded in the door. "That's fascinating," she murmured and knelt beside it.

"Don't touch it!" the Doctor barked and joined her. He pulled the probe out from his right pocket and a stoppered test-tube from his left. "Let me." He swiped a bit of viscous liquid from the base and deposited it in the test tube. "Giant Wasp. Well, tons of amorphous insectivourus life-forms but none in this galactic vector."

"I think I understood some of those words," Agatha said. "Enough to know that you're completely potty!" She stared at him. The Doctor ignored her.

"Lost its sting, though," Donna pointed out. "It's defenseless."

"Creature this size?" the Doctor asked incredulously. "Got to be able to grow a new one."

"Can we return to sanity?" Agatha implored. "There are no such things as giant wasps!"

The Doctor rolled his eyes and Rose shoved him. He was always a bit snippy with historical figures, especially those he considered intelligent, when they refused to believe what he saw as being right in front of their collective face. "Exactly! So the question is, what's it doing here?"

A scream and a heavy thud interrupted their walk back down the stairs. Miss Chandrakala lay on her back on the gravel path that ran around the front of the Eddison mansion. One of the stone gargoyles that adorned the corners of the roof appeared to have come loose and fallen on her. A thin trickle of blood dripped from the corner of her lips. Rose didn't have to ask the Doctor—the woman was close to death. Internal bleeding, most likely. The human body could withstand a great deal, but not an impact like that.

Donna and Agatha were kneeling on one side and Rose on the other. The Doctor was standing, trying to catch a glimpse of the murderer—and it was a murder. The roof was in good condition, and even from his position on the ground he could see the sharp edges of the fractured stone. It was no crack that had been long-coming. This was a sudden application of force. It would have taken incredible strength to shift the stone. A human would have needed a tool, a lever to get the necessary force.

"The poor, little—child," Miss Chandrakala gasped, and then she stilled. Rose reached out and closed her eyes.

"There!" the Doctor shouted. They jumped to their feet in time to see an enormous wasp hovering near the roof. It focused on Miss Chandrakala's body for a moment, and then whizzed away. "Come on!" he called as he took off after it.
"This makes a change," Donna noted as they pelted through the halls of the Eddison mansion. "There's a monster, and we're chasing after it!"

"Bit refreshing, yeah?" Rose called back. The Doctor's hand was clasped around her own, urging her forward. For all of his haste he was considerate enough not to use his full speed and yank her along with him.

"Can't be a monster," Agatha asserted. "It's a trick. They do it with mirrors!"

The wasp was waiting for them at the top of the stairs. Well, not exactly waiting. It seemed to be a bit stuck just above an arch. The sting bumped into the bottom, feeling its way around.

"By all that's holy," she gasped, her face pale as the vicious point scratched deep into the drywall.

The Doctor, of course, was enthralled. "Oh," he said with the kind of wonder he reserved for exotic alien species who were trying to kill them and new flavors of jam. "You are wonderful." The wasp seemed to realize that there was, in fact, enough space for it to squeeze through the arched doorway. It dropped down from its position, just clearing the space with its wings. The Doctor backed away slowly, sending the others towards the stairwell as it drew closer. "Now," he said, "just stop. Stop there."

The wasp charged, stinger thrust out in front of it. The Doctor pulled Rose to the side and against the wall, shielding her with his body. Donna and Agatha sprawled on the floor and the wasp slipped past them. It readied itself for another charge, but Donna stood.

"Oi!" she yelled. "Flyboy!" and held up the magnifying glass. She'd used it earlier to focus sunlight, like children did, and hurt the thing. It fled down the stairwell.

"Don't let it get away!" the Doctor yelled as he and Rose careened after it. "Quick! Before it reverts back to human form!"

They dashed down the stairwell and found themselves in a deserted corridor. "There's nowhere to run!" he cried triumphantly. "Show yourself!"

The doors that lined the hallway opened and Rose, the Doctor, Donna, and Agatha Christie found themselves staring at Lady Eddison's family and guests. The corridor led to their rooms.

"Oh," the Doctor said, chagrin writ large on his face. "That's just cheating."
"This is terrible!" Lady Eddison moaned as they retired to the ornate sitting room. She sat on one of the couches with Roger on one side and her husband on the other. Miss Redmond, Agatha, and Donna occupied to couch across from her. The Reverend took up a position behind them, mirroring the butler's stance opposite him. The Doctor leaned against the wall next to the window with Rose at his side.

"Excuse me, milady, but she was on her way to tell you something," Davenport said from his place behind the Colonel's wheelchair.

"She never found me," Lady Eddison replied. "She had an appointment with death instead!" She began to sob into her handkerchief, and Roger put his arm around her.

"She said 'the poor little child,'" the Doctor told them. "Does that mean anything to anyone?"

He received blank looks. "No children in this house for years," the Colonel commented, with a sharp look at his son. "And highly unlikely that there will be."

Lady Eddison held her hands out imploringly to Agatha. "Mrs. Christie," she said, "you must have twigged something. You've written simply the best detective stories."

"Tell us," the Reverend agreed, "what would Poirot do?"

The Colonel added his voice to the plea. "Heaven's sake, cards on the table, woman! You should be helping us."

Agatha looked overwhelmed, and Rose's heart went out to her. She'd been in the same position often—people at Torchwood heard that she'd traveled with the Doctor and lived in a parallel universe and they automatically expected her to know everything. Even the Doctor was stumped sometimes (loath as he was to admit it). Just because she was famous and wrote brilliant stories didn't mean she could solve all their problems.

"But—I'm merely a writer," the woman protested.

"Surely you can crack it," Miss Redmond said as she laid a hand on Agatha's, which were folded in her lap. "These events, they're just like one of your plots."

Rose felt the Doctor tense at her words. It was true, she supposed. The wasp-alien was acting not at all like she had expected.

"That's what I've been saying!" Donna exclaimed. "Agatha, that's gotta mean something."

"But what?" the woman asked incredulously. "I've no answers, none." Her lips pulled into a thin slash across her face. Her distress was almost palpable, and Rose knew that she must be incredibly
shaken to let it show. "I'm sorry, all of you," she said finally. "I'm truly sorry, but I've failed. If anyone can help us, then, it's the Doctor, not me." They turned expectantly towards him, but he remained silent, his eyes unfocused as he stared at the wall.

Donna found Agatha Christie in a small, open gazebo next to the gravel path that wrapped around the Eddison Mansion. She sat with her elbows on her knees, staring at her feet. She looked defeated and Donna thought she might have been crying, although she would never have admitted it. When she heard the ginger woman approach Agatha straightened and attempted a pleasant expression.

"D'you know what I think?" Donna asked. Agatha remained silent. "Those books of yours," she continued. "One day they could turn them into films. They could be talking pictures."

Agatha looked puzzled. "Talking pictures? Pictures—that talk?" She paused and studied the ginger woman. "What do you mean?"

Donna frowned and sighed. "Oh, blimey. I've done it again."

Agatha looked away. "I appreciate you were trying to be kind, but you were right. These murders are like my own creations." The corners of her mouth turned down. "It's like someone is mocking me, and I've had enough scorn for one lifetime."

"Yeah." Donna paused. "Thing is, I had this bloke once. I was engaged. I loved him, I really did. And I thought—I thought he loved me." She snorted. "Turned out he was lying through his teeth. But I moved on. I found the Doctor and Rose, and that changed my life." She smiled. "There's always someone else."

Agatha's face grew stony. "I see," she replied carefully. "Is my marriage the stuff of gossip, now?"

"No, I just—" Donna sighed. "Sorry."

Agatha sighed and shook her head. "No matter," she said sadly. "The stories are true. I found my husband with another woman—a younger, prettier woman. Isn't it always the way?"

"Well, mine was with a giant spider," Donna mused. "But the principal's the same."

Agatha laughed. "The three of you speak such wonderful nonsense." She paused, considering. "Have you traveled with the Doctor and his wife for long?"

Donna pursed her lips. "Oh, a few months. We're always on the go—gets a bit hard to keep track, honestly."

"And they seem—normal, to you?" she continued.

"Normal?" Donna laughed. "There's nothing normal about the Doctor. He's about as abnormal a bloke as you can get. Honestly, I don't know what Rose sees in him."

"They make an interesting couple," Agatha agreed.

"They're perfect for each other," Donna said quietly. "Scarily so, sometimes. And they deserve to be happy, after what happened." She caught the other woman's intrigued expression and smiled a bit. "It's like one of those epic romances you read about in books—star-crossed lovers, incredible odds, separation, reunion—all of that. They seem larger than life, sometimes, but then you realize they're just people. Like the characters in your books, they're real, honest human beings, and that's why
everyone loves you, Agatha."

She sighed, suitably distracted. "Try as I might, they're hardly great literature. No, that's beyond me." She smiled a bit sadly. "I'm afraid my books will be forgotten, like ephemera." Donna felt a bit badly for returning to an obviously sore topic, but she knew she had to steer the conversation away from the Doctor and Rose. By all accounts Agatha Christie was a remarkably clever woman, but there were things even she was not prepared to accept—and one of those things seemed to be the existence of aliens.

Agatha was looking out over the flowerbeds when something apparently caught her eye. A frown crept over her face as she studied the plants in front of them more closely. "Hello," she said suddenly. "What's that?"

Donna glanced over, but saw nothing remarkable.

"Those flowerbeds were perfectly neat earlier," Agatha continued as she moved to crouch next to them. "Now some of the stalks are bent over." She reached into the middle of the disarray and pulled out a small, leather covered case.

Donna grinned. "There you go. Who'd ever notice that? You're brilliant."

The Doctor was pleased as punch. "Oh," he said appreciatively as he opened the case and revealed a set of delicate metal instruments. "Someone came here all tooled up." He glanced at Agatha. "Sort of stuff a thief would use."

"The Unicorn!" she guessed immediately. "He's here!"

The Doctor nodded. "The Unicorn and the Wasp."

"But where?" Rose asked. "Hiding? Masquerading as a servant?"

"Or a guest, perhaps," the Doctor remarked. "Or maybe just hiding. Not enough information to know for sure yet."

The door of the study creaked open and the butler entered with full cups on a tray. "Your drinks," he said. "Ladies, Doctor."

"Very good, Greeves," the Doctor replied with a pat on the arm. Rose took her glass with a smile. The Mary Pickford had been a bit odd at first—she wasn't used to drinking hard liquor, hadn't done so since Jimmy Stone, but it was sweet and very tasty. Donna had switched to a Foghorn, but the Doctor stuck with his soda and lime.

"How about the science stuff?" the ginger woman asked as she sipped. "What did the two of you find?"

The Doctor pulled the stoppered test-tube out of his pocket. "Vespiform sting," he told them. "Had to double back to make sure. Rose wouldn't let me analyze it here."

"By analyze, he means lick it," she translated for them with a noticeable eye-roll.

"Vespiforms have got hives in the Silfrax Galaxy," the Doctor continued as if he hadn't been interrupted."
Agatha threw up her hands. "Again, you talk like Edward Lear."

The Doctor took a long drink from his glass and ignored Agatha as he had Rose. "For some reason this one's acting like a character in one of your books."

"Come on Agatha," Donna said. "What would Miss Marple do? She'd have overheard something vital by now because the murders think she's just a harmless old lady."

"Clever idea," Agatha commented. "'Miss Marple'—who writes those?"

"Copyright Donna Noble," the other woman replied and set down her glass. "Add it to the list."

The Doctor clenched Rose's hand in his own. He was staring at the wall like he could burn a hole through it. "Donna," he grated.

"Oh, all right," she continued breezily, "we could split the copyright."

"No," he went on. "Rose, something's inhibiting my enzymes." He twitched violently and shouted, dropping his glass, but he kept a hold of Rose's hand.

"Doctor!" she cried, and knelt in front of him. "What's going on? What do you mean?"

"Poison," he said through clenched teeth.

"What do we do?" Donna asked frantically.

"Bitter almonds," Agatha noted as she sniffed the liquid left in the glass, "cyanide."

The Doctor continued to spasm, and Rose held his hand tightly. "Doctor, what do you need? Tell me what you need," she commanded, her voice even and calm.

He pushed himself up laboriously and she wrapped his arm around her waist. "Kitchen!" he gasped. They set off at a run.

The four of them burst into the kitchen, startling the staff. The Doctor grabbed one of the servants. "Ginger beer!" he gritted out. "I need ginger beer!"

The young man blinked, eyes wide, and pulled a bottle down from the shelf. The Doctor downed most of it and splashed the rest on his face.

"The gentleman's gone mad!" one of the cooks cried.

"Doctor," Agatha said, "I am an expert in poisons and there's no cure—it's fatal!"

"Doctor, are you going to regenerate?" Rose asked, still supporting him. "Do we need to go back to the TARDIS?"

"I can stimulate the inhibited enzymes into reversal!" he barked. "Protein! I need protein!" Donna and Agatha dashed about the kitchen while the Doctor took deep, rhythmic breaths, almost like a woman in labor. Rose would have laughed at the absurdity of the situation, if hadn't been so completely, deadly, serious. She rather liked this body and she wasn't eager for him to get another so quickly.

"Walnuts!" Donna cried, and shoved a bag at him. He grabbed handfuls and stuffed them in his
mouth. He moved his fingers until it looked like they were holding something, and then shook them vigorously, miming sprinkling as he frantically chewed the nuts. He looked like a chipmunk—his cheeks puffed out and his eyes wide and watering.

"I don't understand!" Donna cried.

"Doctor, how many words?" Rose asked. Her knees were weak and fear made her feel ill, but she kept her face calm and her voice steady. Panicking would do no one any good, and could potentially cause a great deal of harm. The Doctor held up one finger and then continued with his motion.

"Shake?!" Rose guessed.

"Milkshake?!" Donna asked. He shook his head. "Um, shake, shake, shaker! Cocktail shaker?!" Still no affirmative. "Oh, I don't know, a Harvey Wallbanger?!" she named the first drink that popped into her head.

Finally done with the Walnuts, the Doctor looked at her incredulously. "A Harvey Wallbanger?!" he cried. "How is that one word!"

"Well I don't know!" Donna replied sharply.

"What do you need?" Agatha implored.

"Salt!" he gasped. "I was mimicking salt! I need something salty!" His head snapped back and his eyes shut and his face screwed up in pain.

"What about this?" Donna asked and ran back with a brown package.

"What is it?" he asked, his eyes still closed.

"Salt!" she replied.

"Too salty!" He shook his head.

"Too salty?!" she parroted shrilly and rolled her eyes.

"Breathe, Doctor," Rose ordered. "Find something else, Donna, and quick! Regenerating in here won't be pretty!" His hand was tight around hers, so tight it hurt but she said nothing. He was shaking and she was terrified—he was as well. When he opened his eyes she could see the whites around his irises.

Agatha thrust a bottle at him. "What about this?"

He grabbed it and pulled the lid off roughly. He downed the contents in one go. "What's that?" Donna asked.

"Anchovies," Agatha replied.

"You're not kissing me once this's done." Rose attempted a joke. "What is it, what else?"

The Doctor pushed his hands out, opening and closing them. Donna made jazz hands. "It's a song—'Mammy'? Umm—'Campton Races'? I don't know!" The Doctor made a face.

"'Campton Races?'" he protested.

"All right then," she shot back, "'Towering Inferno!'"
"A shock!" he choked out and made the face and the motion again. "A shock, look, I need something shocking!"

Rose pulled him around so he was facing her. "Okay, I can do that. One shock coming right up." She bit her lip and held his shoulders still. "Doctor, I think I'm pregnant!"

He stared at her for a moment, his mouth open and his eyes wide, and then his head snapped back and a cloud of black dust exploded out of his mouth. Everyone was staring at him, except for Donna, who was gaping at Rose.

"Detox," he explained as the last of the powder diffused into the air. He wiped a dribble of anchovies juice off of his chin and grinned. "Must do that more often, now!" He turned to Rose and grabbed her shoulders, mirroring her grip on his. He kept his eyes fixed on hers, ignoring the confused yells from the kitchen staff around them and Agatha's protestations of his impossibility. "Were you serious?" he asked her, his voice low and intense. "Did you mean what you said, or was that just to surprise me?"

She worried her bottom lip with her teeth. "I was serious," she replied softly. "I'm late."

"How long?"

"A week." Her voice was almost a whisper.

"Rassilon, Rose!" he said. "A week ago we were on Messaline, dodging bullets! Why didn't you tell me? And you've used the Canon since then!"

"Travel in space only," she replied. "Not time. Should be safe enough, but this is exactly why I didn't tell you!" She let go of his shoulders and wrapped her arms around herself. "You'd lock me up in the TARDIS and I won't have it, Doctor. Not one bit. I don't even know for sure."

"I can find out," he offered. "Right here, right now."

"Go on, then," she told him. "Although, d'you mind if we move out of the kitchen?"

They ended up back in the study. Donna sat on one side of Rose, while the Doctor sat on the other and Agatha stood with her arms crossed over her chest. The Doctor licked Rose's wrist lightly, considered for a moment, and then shook his head.

"You're not," he said softly. His face was unreadable, but something flickered in his eyes, something like regret.

Rose offered him a smile. "But that's good, yeah? Our life's not really kid friendly."

"I've got you," he told her, and brushed a lock of hair that had come loose from her knot back behind her ear. "That's enough."

"How can you tell that?" Agatha asked, her eyes wide with disbelief.

"Human women give off a very particular combination of chemicals when they're pregnant," the Doctor replied. "Rose isn't, ergo, she isn't pregnant."

"Who are you, Doctor?" the woman asked. "Who are you really? All of you? Any of you?"

"We're friends," Donna told her. "Just travelers, passing through."
It was a dark and stormy night, and the residents and guests of the Eddison Mansion gathered around the table for dinner. Once more Donna Noble was struck by the oddness of everything—truth really was stranger than fiction. Of course, she should have already learned this fact, she traveled with the Doctor, after all, and she didn't think anyone could make up the things they'd seen. Greeves moved around the room, filling the cut-crystal glasses with a rich red wine. Various servants placed bowls full of a hot yellow-colored soup precisely in the center of each pristine white plate. The Doctor sat with his napkin tucked into his collar and his elbows on the edge of the table. His chin rested atop his clasped hands as he regarded his captive audience. "A terrible day for us all," he mused. "The professor struck down, Miss Chandrakala cruelly taken from us—and yet we still take dinner."

Lady Eddison sipped from her goblet daintily. "We are British, Doctor," she told him. "What else would you have us do?"

"And then someone tried to poison me." He continued. "Any one of you had the chance to put cyanide in my drink, but it rather gave me an idea." He paused as several spoons dipped into the soup and raised the savory liquid towards lips.

"What would that be?" the Reverend asked.

"Poison," the Doctor said succinctly. Several of the people around the table had already partaken of the soup whilst those who hadn't yet froze. "Drink up," he said with a sly smile and brought his own spoon to his lips. "I've laced the soup with pepper."

"Ah," the Colonel noted. "I thought it was jolly spicy."

"Ta," the Doctor replied. "But the active ingredient of pepper is piperine, a chemical traditionally used as an insecticide." Thunder rumbled in the distance. "Anyone got the shivers?" he asked brightly.

The storm broke around them. Lightening flashed and thunder shook the house. A window slammed open and the lights flickered, then went out. The wind roared into the dining room and blew out the candles. With the electricity gone the room plunged into darkness.

"What the deuce is it?" the Colonel cried.

"Listen, listen, listen!" the Doctor ordered. Over the howl of the wind and the crack and boom of thunder, a faint buzzing could be heard.

"No," Lady Eddison whispered. "It can't be!" The buzzing continued. In fact, it grew louder as each moment passed. Brief flashes of lightening illuminated the room and the nervous faces of the guests.

Agatha stood. "Show yourself, demon!" she conjured.

"Nobody move!" the Doctor snapped. His words were ignored. The Colonel pushed his wheelchair back away from the table, and Lady Eddison withdrew until she was almost against the wall. The Reverend ran, as did Davenport the servant.

The next lightning flash revealed the wasp in all its macabre fierceness. It hovered before them, huge and menacing.

"Don't move toward it!" the Doctor commanded. Greeves grabbed Donna and dragged her away. The Doctor pulled Rose to him and kept his body between her and the wasp. His other hand grabbed Agatha's. "Out!" he yelled. "Out, out, out!" They dashed into a side room. "You don't die here,
Agatha," he told her. "You've got a long, long life ahead of you!" He grabbed a sword down from the wall and Rose was reminded briefly of the first time she met the New New Doctor—Christmas Eve and the Sycorax. *This is a fightin' hand.*

"Well, we know the butler didn't do it," Donna noted.

"Then who did?" the Doctor asked. He didn't wait for an answer. Instead, he charged back into the dining room.

The lights flickered and returned—and the wasp was gone. The Reverend lay behind the Colonel's overturned wheelchair. Miss Redmond remained in her seat, her eyes wide as her body shook with fear. Lady Eddison's hand went to her neck. "My jewelry," she gasped. "The Firestone!"


Lady Eddison stood, but fell back into her seat in shock. "My son," she sobbed. "Oh, my little boy!"

As had become their custom the Doctor and Agatha withdrew to the study. Rose and Donna remained with the others, offering comfort and gathering as much information as to what they had seen as possible. Agatha sat on the sofa, her lips drawn and her eyes narrowed in thought. The Doctor stood, leaning against the wall. His hands were in his pockets as he stared straight ahead. Another person was dead. Rose would tell him that it wasn't his fault, that he was doing everything that he could, but he knew it was his fault. If he was just a little cleverer, if he had worked out who it was sooner, than maybe Roger wouldn't have died. Maybe he could have saved Miss Chandrakala. Professor Peach was a stretch, after all the man had died before he'd arrived, but it still felt like his fault. His face was set in lines that betrayed a bit of his age and the depths of rage that lingered within him. His eyes were hard and dark and staring beneath brows drawn down in concentration. He fairly radiated intensity. No one else, he decided. He was going to solve this here and now and no one else would die.

The door opened and Rose and Donna returned. "That poor footman," the ginger woman said softly. "Roger's dead and he can't even mourn him. 1926," she snorted. "It's more like the dark ages."

"Lady Eddison lost her son, but at least she can acknowledge that," Rose agreed sadly. She looked tired, drained, but her eyes blazed with the same determination as the Doctor's.

"Did you inquire after the necklace?" Agatha asked.

Donna nodded. "Lady Eddison brought it back from India. It's worth thousands."

"This thing can sting," the Doctor said evenly, his voice low and rough. "It can fly—it could wipe us all out in seconds. Why is it playing this game?"

"That's what I've been saying," Rose agreed. "If it wanted us dead, why not just kill us all? Why toy with us?" She crossed her arms over her chest and frowned in frustration. "Something's off."

"Every murder is essentially the same," Agatha mused. "They are committed because somebody wants something."
The Doctor raised an eyebrow. "What does a vespiform want?"

"Doctor, stop it," Agatha replied sharply. "The murderer is as human as you or I."

His eyes widened. "Oh, of course!" he crowed. "That's the problem! Rose and I, we've been so focused on the fact that this thing is an alien that we've forgotten that it's also a human!" He moved across the room to sit on the sofa opposite Agatha. "You're the expert."

"I'm not," she protested. "I've told you! I'm just a purveyor of nonsense."

He shook his head. "No, no, no. Because plenty of people write detective stories, but yours are the best, and why? Why are you so good, Agatha Christie?" She looked at him helplessly. "Because you understand. You've lived, you've fought, you've had your heart broken. You know about people—about their passions, their hope and despair and anger—all those tiny, huge things that can turn the most ordinary person into a killer." He leaned forward. "Just think, Agatha. If anyone can solve this, it's you."

An hour later they brought the others into the study. Miss Redmond, Lady Eddison, and the Reverend occupied one couch, Donna and Rose the other, and Agatha and the Doctor stood. "I've called you here," he began, "on this endless night because we have a murderer in our midst, and when it comes to detection there's none finer." He gestured to Agatha. "Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Agatha Christie." Then he took his place next to Rose on the second couch. Agatha moved to stand in front of them with her back to the wall.

"This is a crooked house," she said. "A house of secrets. To understand a solution we must examine them all." She let her eyes rest on Lady Eddison. "Starting with you," and then she moved her gaze on person over, "Miss Redmond."

"But I'm innocent," she protested. "Surely."

"You've never met these people," Agatha responded. "And they've never met you. I think the real Robina Redmond never left London; you're impersonating her."

"How silly," she replied lightly, with a brittle smile. "What proof do you have?" she asked a bit too intensely to have been casual interest.

"When we interviewed you, after Professor Peach's murder," Agatha reminded her, "you said you'd been to the toilet."

"Oh, I know this one," Donna whispered, "if she was really posh she would have said the 'loo.'"

Agatha continued. "Earlier today Miss Noble and I found this," she produced the leather-covered case, "on the lawn right beneath your bathroom window. You must have heard that Miss Noble was searching the bedrooms and panicked." The supposed Miss Redmond drained the goblet beside her and glanced away. She was trying for disdainful, Rose thought, but the fear was there, just beneath the surface. "You ran upstairs and disposed of the evidence."

She set the goblet down. "I've never seen that thing before in my life!" she asserted.

"What's inside it?" Lady Eddison asked.

"The tools of Miss Redmond's trade, or, should I say the Unicorn?" Agatha asked as she opened the case and displayed its contents.
Everyone gasped except the Doctor and Miss Redmond. "You came to this house with the sole intention of stealing the Firestone," Agatha charged.

Inexplicably, the woman formerly known as Miss Redmond smiled. "Oh, all right then," she said in a rough accent, much different from the soft, cultured tones she had spoken before. "It's a fair cop." She stood. "Yes, I'm the bleedin' Unicorn. Ever so nice to meet you, I don't think. Took my chance in the dark and nabbed it." She reached into the front of her dress and pulled out the Firestone. She heaved it at the Doctor, who caught it deftly. "Come on then, you nobs. Arrest me." She stared around the room boldly, challenging anyone to make a move at her.

"So, is she the murderer?" Donna asked.

The Unicorn sneered. "Don't be so thick. I might be a thief, but I'm not a killer."

"Quite," Agatha agreed with a small smile. "There are darker motives at work and in examining this household we come to you, Colonel." She looked at the man levelly for a long moment. He twitched a bit, and glanced from his wife to Agatha, before he finally groaned.

"Damn it, woman," he muttered. "You with your perspicacity; you've rumbled me!" And then he stood.

"Hugh!" Lady Eddison cried in amazement. "You can walk! But why?"

He took her hand and held it gently in his own. "My darling, how else could I be certain of keeping you by my side?" He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it gently. "You are a beautiful woman, Clemency, and inevitably some chap would turn your head, and I couldn't bear that. Staying in the chair was the only way I could be certain of keeping you." He turned back to Agatha. "Confound it, Mrs. Christie. How did you discover the truth?"

Agatha blinked at him. "Actually, I had no idea. I was going to say that you are completely innocent."

"Oh," the Colonel said and Rose was amused to note that the tips of his ears had turned a lovely shade of pink. "Shall I sit down, then?"

"I think you'd better had," Agatha agreed, fighting a smile.

"So he's not the murderer," Donna clarified.

Agatha nodded. "Indeed not. To find the truth, let's return to this." She took the Firestone from the Doctor, who had been swinging it gently on its chain. "Far more than the Unicorn's object of desire, the Firestone has a fascinating history." She held it up for a moment, and then closed her fingers around the gem. "Lady Eddison."

"I've done nothing," the older woman protested.

"You brought it back from India, did you not?" Agatha pressed. "Before you met the Colonel?" Lady Eddison did not reply, but her lips were drawn tight on her face and her eyes fell closed as if she could not bear to look at the people surrounding her. "You came home with malaria and confined yourself to this house for six months in a room that has been kept locked ever since, which, I rather think, means—"

"Stop, please," the woman begged. The words sounded as if they were ripped from her throat.

"I'm sorry," Agatha replied softly. "I'm so sorry, but you had fallen pregnant while in India.
Unmarried and ashamed you hurried back to England with your confidante, a young maid later to become housekeeper—Miss Chandrakala."

"Clemency, is this true?" the Colonel asked.

"My poor baby," Lady Eddison choked and covered her face with a handkerchief. Rose's heart went out to the woman. She had friends who'd raised kids alone, and if there was a stigma in 2005 attached to single mothers, there was certainly one in 1926. "I had to give him away—the shame of it." She took a deep breath and attempted to pull herself together.

"But you never said," her husband breathed. "Not one word."

"I couldn't," she replied a bit sharply. "The family name. I'm British, I carried on." Bitterness slipped into her voice on the last phrase, one that seemed to be a mantra for these people.

"And it was no ordinary pregnancy," the Doctor said. It was the first time, barring his introduction of Agatha, that he'd spoken.

Lady Eddison turned pale. "How do you know that?"

"Excuse me, Agatha," he said. "But this is my territory." He leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "When you heard the buzzing sound in the dining room, you said 'it can't be.' Why did you say that?"

She shook her head. "You'd never believe me."

Rose placed a hand on the Doctor's leg. "I think you'll find we'll believe more than you think, milady," she replied. "I know a thing or two about loving someone who is impossible." He shot her an offended look but it softened into a fond smile as she grinned at him.

"The Doctor has opened my mind to many things," Agatha acknowledged.

"You're not the first to do it, you know," he told the older woman. "And I highly doubt you'll be the last."

"To do what?" the Colonel wanted to know.

"To fall in love with an alien," Rose replied.
Resolution

Chapter Summary

Our dynamic trio solves the mystery and wraps everything up.

Chapter Notes

Some dialogue taken from 'The Unicorn and the Wasp.'

The Colonel stared at Rose. "What?" he asked, as if he couldn't believe his ears.

"Not the first to have a part-alien child, either," the Doctor continued. He ignored the others, most of whom were gaping at them. "Nor the last. By the year five billion every human can claim a little bit of alien in the family tree. Bit unusual for the current time period, though."

"You speak of aliens, of beings from other planets, as if they are real," the Colonel said wonderingly.

The Doctor sniffed. "That's because they are."

"I knew it!" Agatha said triumphantly. She pointed at the Doctor and Rose. "You, sir, are not policeman, and nor are you a policeman's wife!"

Rose smiled. "True enough. We're not even married."

"Ah," the Doctor said delicately. "Actually, we are."

"What?" Rose asked. It was her turn to stare at him.

"On seventeen planets," he confirmed. "Mostly by accident—traveling the way we do, we're bound to stumble onto some ceremony. Not even legal off world, mostly not legal on planet either, as we didn't consummate the marriage." He wiggled his eyebrows at her. She hit his arm and he rubbed it in an exaggerated show of pain.

"Good thing you didn't tell my mum that," she told him with a sparkle of mischief in her eyes. "She'd have made you regenerate again for sure!"

"The Tyler slap is infamous," he agreed.

"How many times did you marry Martha, then?" she asked.

It was like a door closed behind his eyes. "None," he said shortly. "I avoided them after—well."

"Can we get back to the matter of who killed everyone?" Donna asked.

"Right!" the Doctor agreed. "Yes. Lady Eddison, please continue."

"It was forty years ago," she began, and the story of how she met Christopher, a handsome man who
was actually a vespiform in disguise unfolded. She loved him, and in the way of young, first love, she gave him everything—including her virtue. Rose could sympathize. She'd been so swept up by the elation of having someone supposedly love her that she hadn't stopped to think when Jimmy Stone wanted to sleep with her. Granted, he was only hiding a drinking problem and a fondness for hitting and not the fact that he was an alien, but there were parallels. Christopher, however, had really loved Lady Eddison, and if he hadn't been killed in a massive flood they may well have gotten married. "He gave me the Firestone," she told them, and her eyes were bright with tears. "I wear it always so that some part of me will never forget."

"Just like a man," the Unicorn put in. "Flashes 'is family jewels an' you end up with a bun in the oven."

"A 'poor little child," Agatha agreed. "Forty years ago Miss Chandrakala took that newborn babe to an orphanage, but Professor Peach worked it out. He found the birth certificate."

"So 'maiden' was for 'maiden name,'" Rose realized.

"Precisely."

"So she killed him," Donna offered.

"I did not!" Lady Eddison denied.

Agatha continued. "Miss Chandrakala feared that the professor had unearthed your secret. She was coming to warn you."

Donna nodded. "So she killed her.

"I did not!" Lady Eddison asserted once again.

"No, you didn't," Agatha agreed. "Lady Eddison is innocent."

"Blimey," Donna muttered. "All this buildup and runaround, are we ever going to find out what happened?

"All in good time," the Doctor assured her. "No sense of style."

"Doctor?" Mrs. Christie seemed to be looking for him to continue where she had stopped.

"Right!" He stood and thrust his hands in his pockets. "At this point, when we consider the lies and the secrets and the key to these events, then we have to consider—that it was you, Donna Noble." He pointed directly at her.

"Who did I kill?" Donna screeched.

The Doctor blinked. "What? Oh, oh no! You said it all along—the vital clue. This whole thing is being acted out like a murder mystery, which means it was you, Agatha Christie."

Mrs. Christie gasped. "I beg your pardon?"

"So she killed them?" Donna asked, trying to wrap her head around the convoluted logic that was unfolding in front of her. Rose was silent, but her eyes followed the Doctor and she frowned in concentration. It was like untangling ten different necklaces that were almost exactly the same color.

"No," the Doctor dismissed her confusion. "No, but she wrote those brilliant, clever books. And who's her greatest admirer?" He answered his own question. "Lady Eddison."
"Leave me alone," the woman muttered and took another drink from the snifter of brandy next to her.

Donna frowned. "So she did kill them."

"No!" the Doctor replied, as if she was being exceptionally thick. "But just think—last Thursday night what were you doing? Reading one of Mrs. Christie's books, I'll wager."

Lady Eddison stared at him. "Well, yes. Yes I was. I was thinking about how clever she must be to create such wonderful stories."

"And what else happened last Thursday?" The Doctor turned to face the Reverend.

The man looked blankly back at him. "I'm sorry?"

"You said," the Doctor reminded him. "On the lawn, this afternoon. You said that last Thursday night two boys broke into the church."

"That's correct," he agreed. "They did, and I apprehended them."

"A man of the cloth against two strong young lads bend on mischief?" the Doctor asked, his voice dripping disbelief. "A man in his forties—or should I say exactly forty years old?" He turned back to Lady Eddison. "How old would your child be now, milady?"

"Forty," she replied breathlessly, her eyes wide and amazed. "He's forty years old."

"Your child has come home," the Doctor told her gently.

The Reverend laughed. "This is poppycock," he stated derisively.

"Oh?" the Doctor inquired casually as he meandered towards him. "You yourself said you were taught by the Christian Fathers, i.e. raised in an orphanage."

Lady Eddison looked at him with wonder. "My son," she whispered. "Can it be?"

Something in the Doctor's voice shifted. "You found those thieves, Reverend and you got angry, a proper deep anger for the first time in your life and it broke the genetic lock." He paused. "You changed. You realized your inheritance. After all these years you knew who you were." The Reverend was silent. He regarded the Doctor with wariness—all of his mild-mannered disbelief gone. "And that's when it all kicked off!" the Doctor said, the darkness gone from his voice, as he twirled the Firestone. "Because this isn't just a gem, it's a vespiform telepathic recorder. It's part of you—your brain, your very essence. When you activated so did the Firestone. It beamed your real identity directly into your mind and at the same time it absorbed the works of Agatha Christie from Lady Eddison. It all became part of you. The mechanics of those novels formed a template in your brain." He sat on the arm of the couch next to Rose. "You killed in that fashion because that's what you think the world is." A small smile crossed his face, but it was not at all humorous. "Turns out we are in a murder mystery, one of yours, actually," he told Agatha.

She did not respond. A look of vague horror seemed to be frozen on her face.

"So he killed them?" Donna asked. "Yes? Definitely?"

"Yes," the Doctor replied. Agatha rose and walked to stand by the wall, her arms wrapped around herself.
"Well," the Reverend said after a moment. His cheerful politeness had vanished. "This has certainly been a most entertaining evening." The others did not return his attempt at a smile. "Really, you can't believe any of this, surely, Lady Eddison." A low buzzing noise seemed to radiate from his throat. He clamped his lips down but the damage was done.

"Got a bit of buzzing there, Vicar?" the Doctor asked and gestured to his throat.

"Don't make me angry," the man snapped.

"Strong emotions trigger the change," the Doctor explained sagely. "Takes practice for it to be voluntary."

The Reverend stood and began to pace. "Dammit!" he cried after a moment. "You humanzzz, worshiping your tribal sky-godzzz. I am so much more. That night the universe exploded in my mind. I wanted to take what wazzz mine! And you, Doctor! What power do you have here? No human can claim authority over me! What's to stop me from killing you?" he demanded as a strange purple light seemed to radiate from within him. "What's to stop me from killing you all?"

The Doctor moved then, placed himself subtly between the Reverend and the rest of the room. "Oh," he said softly, "but I'm not human. I can help you, Reverend. I can erase the faulty template so that you will be able to function in society, but you have to stop this."

"I don't think he's listening, Doctor!" Donna yelled.

The light became incandescent, and then where the Reverend had been standing a giant wasp hovered.

"Forgive me!" Lady Eddison cried and threw herself forward. Greeves pulled her back as the wasp charged, stinger thrusting viciously at them. The Colonel and the butler had to drag her away.

"No!" Agatha yelled. "No more murder!" The Doctor turned, and saw that she held the Firestone. "If my imagination made you kill, then my imagination will find a way to stop you, foul creature!" The wasp charged again, and she fled with the gem clutched tightly in her hand.

They followed her out of the mansion on foot and to the lake by car. "You said this is the night that Agatha Christie loses her memory!" Donna yelled over the rush of the wind and the growl of the motor.

"Time is in flux!" the Doctor responded tersely. "Tonight could be the night that Agatha Christie dies, and time gets rewritten!"

"Where is she going?" Rose wanted to know. They had their answer a moment later, when they rounded a bend in the road and watched Agatha's car pull up next to a large pool of water.

"The lake!" the Doctor cried. "She's heading for the lake! What's she doing?"

The wasp swooped around the car, unable to get a clear shot at Agatha. Flying and attempting to sting an object in motion appeared too difficult for the newly-transformed Reverend. The car ground to a halt and she stumbled out.

"Here I am!" she told the wasp, "the honey in the trap! Come to me, vespiform!" She held the Firestone high and its purple glow was almost blinding.
"She's controlling it," the Doctor said, wonder creeping into his voice. "Its mind is based on her thought process—they're linked."

"Quite so, Doctor," Agatha responded, her eyes still on the wasp. "If I die then this creature might die with me."

But the Doctor would not have that. He stood in front of her, arms outstretched. "Don't hurt her!" he implored. "You're not meant to be like this! You've got the wrong template in your mind!" The wasp circled them.

"It's not listening!" Donna said. She grabbed the Firestone from Agatha's hand and threw it in the water. She almost didn't realize what she was doing, she only knew that if they delayed any longer it would charge and there was precious little to shield them from its sting. Her throw was good, and the Firestone sank into the middle of the lake. The wasp dived after it. Purple light shone from the depths and the water roiled and bubbled. The Doctor was staring at it, an obscure pain etched on his face. Rose threaded her fingers through his.

"How do you kill a wasp?" the ginger woman asked sadly. "Drown 'im. Just like his father."

"Donna," the Doctor chastised, "he couldn't help himself."

"Neither could I," she replied.

"Death comes as the end," Agatha intoned, "and Justice is served."


Agatha studied him for a moment. "Only one mystery remains, Doctor. Who are you?"

He opened his mouth to reply but was cut off by a sharp groan as Agatha crumpled to the ground.

"It's the Firestone!" he snapped. "It's connected to the vespiform's mind, and to Agatha. He's dying, and he'll take her with him!"

Then the purple light flashed. When it faded Agatha's eyes were closed but her breathing was easy and her pulse was strong. The water calmed and soon the lake's surface was still.

"What happened?" Rose asked.

"It let her go." The Doctor picked Agatha up easily. "Right at the end, the vespiform chose to save someone's life."

"Is she alright, though?" Donna asked as they walked back to the car.

"She'll be fine," he assured her. "Except for the amnesia, but that was supposed to happen. The Firestone wiped her mind—the events of today, all of them, gone."

"She'll forget about us, then," Rose noted.

"That's good, sometimes," he said quietly. "And besides, now we know what happened—how her car got to the lake, how she wound up in Harrogate." He smiled at them. "We solved the mystery of Agatha Christie."

They left her at the hotel after a short trip in the TARDIS to preserve the time lines. She was
unconscious still, but the Doctor was confident that she would wake in a few moments. "I feel bad leaving here there," Rose confessed.

"She'll be fine," he assured her. "And no one will ever know."

"What about Lady Eddison, the Colonel, all the staff?" Donna asked.

"Shameful story," he replied. "They'd never talk of it. And the Unicorn can't even say she was there. She did a bunk back to London town."

"What about Agatha?" Rose asked as they walked back into the TARDIS and the Doctor threw his coat over a coral strut.

"Great life," he said with a smile. "Met another man, got married again, saw the world—wrote and wrote and wrote."

Donna sighed. "But she never thought her books were any good. She must have spent all those years wondering."

"I don't think she ever quite forgot, though," the Doctor said with a thoughtful look on his face. "A great mind like that—some of the details kept bleeding through, all the bits her imagination could use, like Miss Marple."

"Should have gotten her to sign a contract." Donna grinned.

The Doctor paused and blinked for a moment. "Hold on!" he said, and dashed around the console room. He prized up one of the slabs of wire grating and pulled a wooden chest up onto the floor. "Here we go!" he said brightly and began pulling bits and bobs out of the chest. "That's C for cybermen, and carrionite, and here we are!" He handed a paperback book to Donna.

The cover art depicted a huge wasp threatening an airplane. "She did remember!" Donna exclaimed delightedly.

He smiled. "Somewhere in the back of her mind it lingered. And that's not all—look at the copyright page."

She opened it. "Facsimile edition," she read, "published in the year—five billion?"

"People never stop reading them," he agreed. "She is the best-selling novelist of all time."

"Better than Charles Dickens?" Rose asked teasingly.

"Oh, Charley-boy was brilliant," the Doctor replied, "but everyone loves a good detective story."

"But she never knew," Donna reminded them.

The Doctor blinked. "No one does. All you can do is hope for the best, and maybe that's what kept her writing. Same thing keeps me traveling, well, that and there's so much of the universe left to see." He squeezed Rose's hand and stood. "Onwards?" he asked.

Donna glanced at Rose, who was also smiling. "Onwards," she agreed.
Shadows that Devour

Chapter Notes

Nothing you recognize belongs to me! Dialogue taken from 'Silence in the Library.'

The Doctor threw open the TARDIS door and stepped out into the dimly lit space beyond. It was cavernous, vast in the way that ancient monuments and ruined cathedrals were. Light filtered in through windows high on the walls, almost to the ceiling, and pooled on the wooden floor. Little wheeled carts were scattered about piled with volumes in all the colors of the rainbow and some besides. A large circular desk occupied one end of the room, accompanied by four strange white statues. Modern art, Donna thought, was always rather odd.

"Books!" the Doctor exclaimed with exuberant joy. "People never stop loving books, you know." He spoke with the authority of someone who was intimately acquainted with the subject. "By now you've got holovids, direct-to-brain downloads, fiction mist, all of that, but you need the smell."

"You would say that," Rose commented as she studied the walls. They were wood paneling for the most part, like the floor, but large swathes of space were taken up by beautiful, vivid murals. She hadn't been one for reading, not until she met the Doctor, but he enjoyed reading and reading to her, and she found she couldn't object to listening to him talk. After Canary Wharf she sought solace in familiar volumes and gradually she realized what a joy it could be. The library had become one of her favorite places in the Tyler Mansion. Books seemed welcoming—but not here. Dust coated every surface and there was an air of stillness, of complete silence that she'd come to associate with tombs or the temporarily vacated dens of predators.

The Doctor inhaled loudly. "The smell of books, just breathe it in!"

Donna arched an eyebrow skeptically. She enjoyed reading as well as the next person, but the Doctor seemed to take it to previously unheard of levels. They walked through a doorway—unlocked, she noted—and into a network of hallways. Like the room they had landed in, the ceilings were high and the floors were wood, but pillars lined the hallways, which seemed to be situated around an open area, more like an encircling deck than a true hallway system.

"The Library," the Doctor declared.

"So big it doesn't need a name," Donna commented, "just a great big 'the.'"

"It's impressive," he protested.

"That why you're 'the' Doctor, because you're that impressive?" Rose teased. "Or is your name just embarrassing. Oh god," she paused, eyes wide. "It's not really John Smith, is it? If anyone actually had that name, it would be you!"

"Oi!" he shot back with a sniff. "I am that impressive, and no, my name isn't John Smith." He rolled his eyes. "That's a boring name suitable for a boring person, and whatever I am, I'm not boring."

"And so humble," Donna muttered.

He refused to dignify her comment with a reply. Instead he focused on their location. "It's a world,
he explained. "Literally, a world. The whole planet is one giant library and the core is the index database, the largest hard drive ever created. Up here," he gestured to the surrounding area, "is every book ever written." He made a face. "And some that shouldn't have been. Whole continents of Jeffery Archer, 'Bridget Jones,' 'Monty Python's Big Red Book.' They're brand-new editions, all specially printed." He licked his finger and held it up like he was testing the wind. "We're near the equator, so—biographies!" he yelled and Donna jumped. Rose managed to keep her feet on the floor, but then she was a bit more accustomed to his habit of blurting out whatever he happened to be thinking at the moment.

"I love biographies," he said with a smile on his face.

Donna snorted. "You would. Always a death at the end."

"You need a good death," he asserted. "Without death there would only be comedies, and that's tedious after the thousandth one you've read. Dying gives us size."

"Reckon we'll find your biography here?" Rose asked with a tongue-touched smile.

"Nah," the Doctor told her. "It would be incomplete." He snatched a book from Donna, who was just about to open it. "Oi! Spoilers," he said severely.

"What?" she demanded.

"These books are from your future," he informed her. "You don't want to read ahead; it would spoil all the surprises, like peeking at the end."

The ginger woman cocked her head to the side and stared at him. "Isn't traveling with you one big spoiler?"

The Doctor frowned. "I—try to keep you away from major plot developments." He paused and rubbed the back of his neck. "Which to be honest, I seem to be very bad at." He glanced around, still frowning. He was worried, Rose knew. She was too. All of her Torchwood training and her instincts were screaming that something was terribly, terribly wrong. She could feel the hairs on her arms and the back of her neck standing on end. It was unnatural, this silence. Oppressive.

"This is the biggest library in the universe," she said slowly. "So where is everyone?"

"Exactly," the Doctor agreed, all of the enthusiasm of the moment before gone. "It's silent. Nowhere is actually silent, not when someone, anyone is around."

"The Library?" Donna asked.

"The planet," he responded shortly. "The whole planet. His eyes fell on a wooden booth that stood next to the wall and he went to it. "Aha! A console!" He pulled out the sonic and turned it on the screen set into the smooth wood. 'The Library' scrolled across the screen in large green letters.

"Maybe you landed on a Sunday," Donna offered.

"He doesn't do Sundays," Rose told her quietly.

"Nope!" he replied, and popped the 'p.' "Sundays are boring."

"Maybe everyone's just really really quiet," she tried again.

The Doctor grunted noncommittally. "They'd still show up on the system," he pointed out, and
gestured at the screen.

Donna sighed and rolled her eyes. "Doctor, why are we here?" She crossed her arms and gave him her best intimidating stare. It didn't work, but it made her feel better. "It was all 'let's hit the beach!' and then we came here. And Rose has that new bikini that I know you want her to wear for you, so what in blazes are we doing in a Library, planet or not?"

He tried for dissembling. "Oh, just passing through and wanted to pop in. Thought I might check out a book or two."

It didn't work.

"No, seriously," Donna insisted. "We could be on a beach right now, sipping daiquiris." She leaned in. "I bet they'd have banana. Space Florida, you said, best beach in the universe. They've got automatic sand!" She paused. "And did I mention Rose's new bikini? It's red."

"Now, that's interesting," the Doctor mused.

"My bikini?" Rose asked, a bit lost. He blinked. "What? No, although—" he raked his eyes over her and grinned. "But really, it's odd." And his attention was back on the screen. Following his moods was likely to give a person whiplash, Rose thought. "I'm scanning for life forms," he explained. "And if I look for basic humanoids—you know, book readers, few limbs and a face, I get three. Just us. But, if I widen the perimeters to include any kind of life form…" He gestured to the screen. "A million million, and further. The scan gives up."

"But there's nothing here," Donna protested.

"Nothing that we can see," Rose amended and inched closer to the Doctor. He took her hand and she could feel tension radiating off of him. He was on mauve alert.

"A million million life forms," he said softly, "and silence in the Library."

"But there's no one here," Donna reiterated, "no one, just books." She scoffed. "I mean, it's not the books, is it? Can't be." He said nothing, and Rose continued to glance around. "Books can't be alive." She looked from her companions to the volumes strewn about liberally and her voice lost some of its customary bravado.

"Stranger things have happened," Rose pointed out. They looked at each other, and then moved towards the books that stood on a ledge against the railing. The Doctor almost touched one when an alarm sounded and all three of them jumped.

"Welcome," an automated voice said. "That came from back there," Rose said shakily and gestured toward the room they'd just left.

The Doctor gave her a relieved smile. "Yeah, it did."

Donna straightened. "Let's check it out, then."

One of the strange, modern-artesque statues whirred to life as the three travelers drew closer to the
large, circular desk. There were more wooden booths, Rose noted, although they seemed to be off. She was surprised to see a face on the statue. Donna looked surprised as well, although the Doctor, as usual, was unruffled.

"I am courtesy node seven-ten-slash-aqua," the statue told them. "Please enjoy the Library and respect the personal access codes of all your fellow readers, regardless of species or hygiene taboo."

"That face looks real," Donna said.

"Don't worry about it," the Doctor replied. He didn't bother to explain—unusual, Rose thought. He was always ready with a diatribe, especially if it was something he deemed educational. He knew something he didn't want to say. Donna, of course, was having none of it.

"But—a statue with a real face?" She smiled. "It's a hologram or something, isn't it."

"No, but it's fine, really." He didn't want to talk about it at all. In fact, he was becoming quite uncomfortable. Rose wondered what was so horrible about the face that would lead him to avoid the subject so fervently.

"Additional," the statue continued. "There follows a brief message from the head librarian for your urgent attention. It has been edited for tone and content by a Felman Lux automated decency filter. Message follows: Run," the face said. "For god's sake, run. Nowhere is safe. The Library has sealed itself. We can't—oh, they're here. Arg, slarg, snick." The statue paused. "Message ends. Please switch off your mobile comms devices for the comfort of other readers."

They stared at the face on the statue. Its message was all the more chilling as it lacked intonation or expression. And the end—what did that mean? Rose shivered. It only confirmed what her body had been telling her since they stepped out of the TARDIS. Something dangerous was in the Library, something deadly.

"So that's why we're here," the Doctor said after a moment. He was glaring at the face like he could force it to divulge more information. Unfortunately it wasn't alive, and was thus unaffected. "Any other messages, same date stamp?" he asked. "One additional message," the statue confirmed. "This message carries a Felman Lux Coherency warning of 5011…"

"Yes, yes," he interrupted. "Just play it."

"Message follows: Count the shadows. For god's sake, remember: if you want to live, count the shadows. Message ends." They stood for a moment, and then the Doctor turned, scanning the area. He threaded his fingers through Rose's and gave her hand a comforting squeeze. She regarded him with wide eyes as she worried her bottom lip with her teeth.

"Donna," he said finally.

"Yeah?" Her eyes were wide as well, and her voice was breathy.

"Stay out of the shadows." He continued to stare around them.

"Why?" she asked a bit more firmly. "What's in the shadows?" He didn't answer her. Instead he turned, and walked back the way they came.

They took another turn and ended up in the stacks. Shelves stretched almost to the ceiling, several stories above them, and ladders led to each story.
"We weren't in the neighborhood," Rose told him.

"Ah," he replied delicately as they wandered. "No. Not as such. I sort of—lied. A little." He pulled out the psychic paper. "I got a message on this." She reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out her own wallet of psychic paper—the same one he'd given her when they went to Canary Wharf.

She flipped it open so he could see. "Yeah. So did I."

"Same as mine," he noted. "Just 'the Library, come as soon as you can,' and signed with a hug and a kiss."

She cocked an eyebrow. "Who would want to give us both, besides Jack?"

He shrugged. "I never turn down a cry for help."

"Even one that's signed with a kiss?" Donna wanted to know. "Did both psychic papers pick it up because they were in the same general area, or did someone have to direct the message to each of you individually?"

"Excellent question, Donna." The Doctor grinned. "The message would have to be for both of us. Ergo, it was directed to Rose and to me. If it had been to one or the other only one of the papers would have registered. They code themselves with the DNA of the person who posses them at any given time."

"Well, who's it from?" she wanted to know.

The Doctor shrugged. "No idea."

"I would have guessed Jack," Rose replied, "but there wasn't enough flirting, and he'd just call my mobile."

A faint electrical crackle came from the opposite end of the aisle. "So why did we come here?" Donna asked, exasperation heavy in her voice. The Doctor was staring past her, staring down the row of shelves. "Well?" she demanded.

"Donna," he said slowly, and pointed. One by one the lights were going out. Darkness advanced down the aisle toward them, a thick, unnatural blackness that seemed almost palpable.

"What's happening?" the ginger woman asked, her voice shaking.

"Run!" Rose yelled. She grabbed the Doctor's hand and pulled him away. The darkness followed.
The Doctor rattled the door's handle. Nothing. It was stuck tight.

"Is it locked?" Donna cried.

"Stuck!" he yelled back. "Jammed! The wood's warped."

"Well sonic it!" she told him, as if he was slow.

He set his shoulder against the door and shoved. "It's wood! The screwdriver doesn't work on wood!" Lightbulb after lightbulb crackled and went out as the darkness surged down the aisle in increments. "If I can vibrate the lining I can shatterline the interface, fry the molecules, maybe."

"Get out of the way!" Donna ordered. And then she kicked the door in.

They made it inside just before the darkness reached them. Rose slammed the doors shut and the Doctor slid a book through the handles, effectively locking them in. Donna leaned against the cool wood, panting. Rose and the Doctor turned to examine the room more closely and that's when they noticed it: a security camera with a wooden shell to match the walls and floor. It hovered just above head-height for Rose in the exact center of the room.

"Oh," the Doctor said brightly as he stuck his hands in his pockets. "Hello. Didn't mean to burst in on you like that. Okay if we stop here for a bit?"

The camera shuddered and fell. Donna blinked. "What is it?" she asked as they walked toward the device.

"Security camera," the Doctor replied. He nudged the ball with his foot. "Switched itself off." He knelt and picked it up to examine it more closely. His forehead wrinkled as he studied the strange object. "Rose?"

She knelt next to him. "Yeah?"

"Can you get my sonic out of my pocket?"

She quirked an eyebrow at him. "Any reason you can't get it yourself?"

"Bit busy," he answered, his attention fixed on the camera. Donna snorted and Rose rolled her eyes, but she shoved her hand into his jacket pocket and began pulling things out and handing them to Donna. When Rose finally obtained the Sonic Screwdriver, the ginger woman was left holding a yoyo, a ball of string, three packs of (the same flavor of) gum, six pencils, one copy of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, and two bananas.
"Blimey, you need to clean out your pockets, spaceman!" Donna announced as Rose handed over the sonic. He turned it on the camera.

After a moment his eyes widened and he set the ball gently back on the floor. "I'm sorry," he murmured, and he sounded sincere. "I'm so sorry."

"What?" Donna wanted to know. "Talking to machines again?"

Red words scrolled across a black bar around the top of the ball. 'Stop it Stop it Stop it' repeated in a loop.

"It's alive," the Doctor replied. "By the way, Donna, nice door skills."

She shrugged. "Yeah, well, you know—boyfriends. Sometimes you need the element of surprise."

Rose laughed. "I could do with a bit of that. Time Lord hearing makes sneaking very difficult."

"You don't need any help," he assured her. "You are far too sneaky as it is."

"What was that?" Donna asked after a while. "What was after us?" She turned in place, taking in the room they'd sought sanctuary in. "I mean, did we just run away from a power cut?"

"Possibly," the Doctor said as he stood and took Rose's hand.

She shook her head. "I don't think so. It felt—wrong." She shivered. "This whole place feels wrong."

"Are we safe here?" Donna wanted to know. Fear crept into her voice.

"Course we're safe!" The Doctor practically oozed confidence. "There's a little shop!" He gestured to the glass wall behind them. Sure enough, a sign marked "gift shop" with a little arrow pointing to their right was positioned at eye height.

The camera beeped. Immediately the Doctor was back on the ground beside it. "Others are coming," he read as the text scrolled across. "The Library has been breached."

"What does that mean?" Rose asked.

"I don't know," he said.

Donna decided that someone needed to take the initiative, and walked over to another modern-art statue thing. "Excuse me," she began, "but what others?"

The Doctor snorted. "That's little more than a speak-your-weight machine," he told her. "Won't do you any good."

"So why's it got a face, then?" she shot back.

The statue began to speak. "This flesh aspect was donated by Mark Chambers on the occasion of his death." The Doctor rubbed the back of his neck and Donna's eyes widened. "It has been actualized for you from the many facial aspects saved to our flesh banks. Please enjoy."

"It's a real face?" Donna screeched.

The Doctor shrugged. "It's the fifty-first century, Donna. For them it's like—like donating a park bench."
"But it's a face," she said.

He shrugged again. "Different culture."

She stepped back involuntarily but the Doctor grabbed her and yanked her back. "Oi!" she barked. "Don't you be getting fresh with me, Martian! Your girlfriend's right there!"

The Doctor, however, was staring at the floor behind her. A thick, triangular shadow extended out into what had been an open circle of light. "The shadow," he said. "Look."

"What about it?" Donna wanted to know. Rose could feel her hackles rising again.

"Count the shadows," the Doctor murmured. His eyes went glassy.

"One," Donna replied smartly. "There, I counted it."

Rose followed his gaze to the ceiling. "But Donna," she asked, her voice shaking. "What's casting it?" There was nothing, nothing that was blocking the light, nothing that would have been able to make a shadow where one lay.

"Oh!" the Doctor yelled, and Rose and Donna both jumped. "Oh I'm thick! I'm old and I'm thick!" He grabbed his hair as he paced, a bundle of nervous energy. "My head's too full of stuff!" he muttered and continued to pace. "Oh, I need a bigger head!"

An electric crackling sound drew their attention to a light in one of the hallways branching off from the room. The bulb flickered and buzzed. "Must be going out," Donna noted.

He shook his head. "This place runs on fission cells. They'll outlast the sun."

"Then why is it dark?" Rose's voice was stronger, but her eyes were wide enough so that he could see the white around her irises.

"It's not dark," he replied.

Donna stared at him. "Maybe not to your superior Time Lord vision," she said, "but it's dark for us humans!"

"It's not dark," he repeated.

"Doctor," Rose called, and the tremor was back. He turned to look at her. She was staring at the floor behind them. "That shadow—it's gone."

His face was bleak. "We need to get back to the TARDIS."

"Why?" Donna asked, still staring at the flickering light in the shadowy corridor.

"That shadow isn't gone." His voice was quiet and deadly serious. He was using the tone reserved for times of incredible danger or furious anger. "It's moved."

"Reminder," the Statue said. "The Library has been breached. Others are coming."

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Light flashed and the floor shook. One of the doors set into the wall of the room burst open, and a figure in a white space-suit stepped inside. Others followed, and soon six white-suited figures stood in front of the Doctor, Rose, and Donna. One of them aimed a flashlight at them, and Donna raised
her arm to shield her eyes.

"Oi!" she snapped, "mind pointing that away from us, thanks? There's no need to make us blind!"

Surprisingly, the figure did as she asked and pointed the light back at the floor. The lead figure appeared to be in charge. It stood in front of them and suddenly the reflective visor cleared and a woman smiled at them. "Hello, handsome," she said, laugh lines around her eyes crinkling in mirth.

The Doctor was not amused. "Get out," he told her flatly. "All of you," he said, including the others, "get back in your rocket and fly away." He pointed back in the direction they came. "Tell your children and grandchildren you came to the Library and lived; they won't believe you."

"Pop your helmets, everyone," the strange woman ordered. "We've got breathers."

The Doctor stared at them. Again with the not-listening! Didn't they realize that he was trying to save their lives? Would he ever, ever run into a group of people who listened when he told them something?

"How do you know they're not androids?" one of the figures, another woman from the sound of her voice, asked.

The strange woman shook her curly hair out and flashed them another grin. "I've dated androids, and they're rubbish." Reluctantly the others removed their helmets. Besides the strange, curly-haired woman, there was an older man, a young black man, a young black woman, a young white man with brown hair, and a beautiful white girl who stood next to the older man deferentially.

The older man stormed up to the curly-haired woman. "Who are they?" he hissed. "You said we were the only expedition! I paid for exclusives!"

"I lied," the curly-haired woman replied casually. "I'm always doing that. There's bound to be others."

The young black woman regarded them cautiously. She was the one who had suggested they were androids, and Rose found herself approving of the girl. She, at least, appeared to have a decent head on her shoulders. She wasn't so sure about the curly-haired woman. She was acting a bit familiar for someone they'd never met before.

The older man held out his hand and snapped his fingers. "Miss Evangelista, I want to see the contracts." The pretty girl fumbled for a moment in the large black bag she carried and then pulled out three slips of paper.

"You came through the North door, yeah?" the curly-haired woman asked the Doctor. "How was it? Was there much damage?"

He was staring at her like he thought she was mad or stupid or perhaps a bit of both. He leaned forward, hands on his hips. "Please. Just leave. I'm asking you seriously and properly, just—hang on!" He looked around. "Did you say expedition?"

The older man grunted. "My expedition. I funded it."

He groaned. "Oh, tell me you're not."

"Not what?" the young black woman asked.

"Archeologists." He wrinkled his nose and said the word like it left a nasty taste in his mouth.
"Got a problem with archeologists?" the curly-haired woman wanted to know.

He stared at her again like she was especially thick. Usually by now Rose would have elbowed him and reminded him not to be rude, but the strange woman put her on edge and she couldn't help but feel a little glad that the Doctor was not impressed with her. "I'm a time traveler," he said scathingly. "I point and laugh at archeologists."

She held out her hand with a smile. "Professor River Song, archeologist."

The Doctor took her hand. "River Song, lovely name. Now as you're leaving, and you are leaving, you need to set up a quarantine beacon. Code-wall the planet, the whole planet." He spoke intensely, with an air of command that usually had people tripping over themselves to do what he said. "Nobody comes here ever again, not one living thing. Not here, not ever." Movement caught his eye. The young black woman, the one who thought they were androids, was wandering back the way they came. He grabbed her arm and pulled her back inside the room. "What's your name?" he asked her.

She blinked at him. "Anita."

He led her back into the light. "Anita, nice to meet you. Stay out of the shadows. Not a foot, not a finger in the shadows until you're safely back in your ship." He stepped back and gestured at them. "That goes for all of you. Stay in the light! Find a nice, bright spot and just stand."

Professor Song regarded him levelly. A corner of her mouth twitched as if she wanted to smile but was holding herself back.

"If you understand me," the Doctor continued, "look very, very scared." Rose was fairly sure she already did. The others seemed confused and looked rather like they thought he was mad. She didn't blame them. He was—in intense, and he hadn't yet explained why they should be so terrified. He glanced around at the people surrounding him. "No," he said slowly. "Bit more scared than that." Professor Song looked intrigued, the older man looked annoyed, and the others looked confused. The only one who looked frightened was the girl, Miss Evangelista. The Doctor sighed. "That'll have to do." He grabbed the young black man's arm. "You, who are you?"

"Dave," the boy said. "Well, Other Dave, because the pilot's Proper Dave." He looked like he wanted to continue babbling, but the Doctor had decided that he was the only one allowed to babble in their current situation of life-or-death peril, so he promptly cut the boy off.

"The way you came," he said and gestured out the door, "look the same, does it?"

"Yeah," the other man responded automatically, and then blinked. "Well—no. Not at all. Blimey, it got dark. Before we could see all the way to the end of the aisle and now—nothing." The path back to their ship was shrouded in more of the unnatural darkness.

"Seal up the door," the Doctor replied grimly. "We'll have to find another way out."

"We're not looking for a way out!" the older man blustered. "Miss Evangelista!" He handed her a clipboard.

Miss Evangelista approached the Doctor, who had joined Rose and Donna in the center of the circle of light that encompassed the middle of the room. "I'm Mr. Lux's personal—everything," she told them hesitantly, Mr. Lux apparently being the grouchy older man who claimed to have funded the trip. "You need to sign these contracts agreeing that your individual experiences inside the Library are the intellectual property of the Felman Lux Corporation."
"Oh yeah?" Donna asked as the girl handed them the papers. All three of them ripped the contracts in half and tossed them on the ground.

"I don't sign contracts," Rose told her. "No offense. What happens to me belongs to no one else." Her voice was flat and angry.

Mr. Lux stepped forward. "My family built this library!" he insisted. "I have rights."

"You have a right," Rose replied fiercely, "to get out alive, so sit down and shut the hell up while we try to make sure you do!"

"You have a mouth that won't stop," River observed. She turned back to Rose, the Doctor and Donna. "You think there's danger here?" she asked.

"Something came to this library and killed everything in it, killed a whole world," the Doctor snapped back. "So yeah, just a bit."

"That was a hundred years ago," River pointed out. "The Library's been silent ever since. Whatever came here is long dead."

He raised an eyebrow. "Bet your life?"

"Always do," she replied with a saucy smirk. The Doctor regarded her oddly, as if she was a puzzle he was trying to solve. Donna stared at her like she was daft, and Rose bristled just a bit.

A commotion by the door drew their attention away. "What are you doing?" Mr. Lux demanded of Other Dave.

"He said seal the door," the man replied.

"And you're taking orders from him now?" Lux continued.

The Doctor took the torch out of Lux's hand and whirled away. "Spooky, isn't it?" he asked over his shoulder. Other Dave hid a smile as he returned to sealing the door shut. The Doctor shone the torch into the shadows like he was searching for something. Donna was talking to Anita and Rose stood beside him staring into the darkness.

"Almost every species in the universe has an irrational fear of the dark," he murmured, his eyes fixed on the corridor in front of them. "But they're wrong," he continued, "because it's not irrational. It's Vashta Nerada."

The name sent shivers down her spine and goose bumps up her arms. "I've never heard of them," she replied just as quietly.

"They're what's in the dark, what's always in the dark." He stood for another moment staring into the corridor and then whirled around. "Lights!" he cried. "That's what we need—lights!" He tossed the flashlight to Rose. "D'you have lights?" They nodded. "Good. Form a circle, a safe area, big as you can with the lights pointing out. Got it?"

"Do as he says," River ordered as the Doctor crouched down on the floor and began zapping the sonic screwdriver at the darkness surrounding them.

"You're listening to him?" Mr. Lux demanded incredulously.
"Yes," she replied firmly. "I am. Anita, unpack the lights. Other Dave, make sure the door's secure then help Anita. Mr. Lux, put your helmet back on and shield the visor. Proper Dave, find an active terminal. I want you to access the Library database; see what you can find out about what happened here a hundred years ago."

The Doctor finished with his zapping and joined Proper Dave at the terminal. "I can help with this," he told the man. "Absolute whiz with tech, I am."

"Professor Song," Mr. Lux asked. "Why am I the only one wearing my helmet?"

She smiled at him, but there was no warmth in the expression. "I don't fancy you."

"You're with me, pretty. Step into my office." Donna was helping Other Dave and Anita with the lights and the Doctor was occupied helping Proper Dave with the terminal, so there was no one to come to her rescue. The older woman led her behind one of the curved desks that bordered the room and pulled out a battered blue book. Rose stared at it. The cover and spine were decorated to look like the TARDIS.

"Thanks," she said as she set the book on the table and rearranged her pack.

Rose blinked. "For what?"

River shrugged. "The usual, coming when I called."

She raised an eyebrow. "That was you?"

"Good thing that it's us girls keeping track," River said conversationally. "Himself is horrible at anything resembling domestics. Remember the last time you had him write the journal?" she snickered. "Handwriting aside, he always leaves out the most important bits. Life with time travel—it's such hard work."

"Judging by your clothes and companion, I'm going to say early days," she mused as she opened the book. "Has he taken you to Astoroliinth in the 43rd century yet? Fabulous shopping—there's a place with running heels that are to die for. No more sprained ankles when he insists that wearing pretty shoes is alright and then you end up running for your lives." She grinned like it was some kind of inside joke. "Got to topple those regimes in style."

"Going by your silence, I'd say 'no.'" She flipped further back in the book. "What about the crash of the Byzantium, have we done that?"

"And that's a 'no' as well," she huffed a bit. "I assume that the three of you have a very good reason for pretending you don't know me? Did himself do something to offend the Lux corporation?"

"Oh, we've got a very good reason," Rose replied. There was something—off about this woman who acted like she knew them so well. "I've never seen you before in my life."

Professor River Song froze, and then she looked at Rose, really looked at her. Her eyes were suddenly sharp and bright and she gasped. "You're so young," she said, wonder in her voice. A corner of Rose's mouth pulled up into a sardonic half-smile. "I look it, I know, but I'm really not."

"But you are," River continued. "Younger than I've ever seen you, and so is he. And Donna—the twenty-seven planets haven't happened for you yet, have they?" Her voice had gone soft and sympathetic.

Rose blinked at her. "What?"

Something shifted in River's eyes and she looked ten years older and much more tired. "They haven't." She was silent for a moment and she looked—gutted, Rose thought. She looked like how
Rose felt when she was trapped in the parallel world, like the life had been sucked right out of her.

"Don't let your shadows cross!" the Doctor barked. "Don't even let them touch. Any one of them could be infected."

Anita frowned. "How can a shadow be infected?" she asked, but received no answer.

"Excuse me," Miss Evangelista said, "but can I help?"

"We're fine, thanks," Other Dave said with a bit of a smile.

"I could hold things," she offered, but Anita shook her head. Miss Evangelista flounced off to stand next to Mr. Lux, looking decidedly uncomfortable.

"There's work to go around," Donna pointed out. "Why can't she help?"

"Trust me," Other Dave told her. "I just spent four days on a ship with that woman, and she's not the brightest bulb in the box."

Anita smirked. "She confused the escape pod with the bathroom, and we had to go back for her—twice."

A ringing noise cut through the still air and distracted them all. It was a relief, for Rose, who was highly unsettled by River's reaction to her realization that they didn't know her. It was—intense. And it wasn't just the Doctor, as she'd originally thought. Apparently River Song knew both of them, and in their personal futures. Meeting someone from your future was never good, the Doctor had told her, and she'd learned her lesson after she saved her father. They didn't need Reapers on top of the Vashta Nerada.

"Sorry," Proper Dave called out. "That was me. I'm trying to get into the security protocols, but I seem to have set something off."

"What is that?" River asked. "Is that an alarm?"

Donna frowned. "Doctor," she said. "Is that a phone?"

He blinked. "I think it is."

"I'm trying to call up the Data Core," Proper Dave explained. "It's not responding—just that noise."

"But it's a phone!" Rose exclaimed.

The Doctor gently shoved Proper Dave aside. "Let me try something." He pulled out the sonic and buzzed it at the screen. "Very handy for hacking, sonic screwdrivers," he said smugly.

"Yes, you're very proud of your screwdriver," River said with a roll of her eyes. "I think he's compensating for something," she whispered conspiratorially to Rose.

"He's really not," she replied, and then realized she'd spoken aloud and blushed. River smirked.

The Doctor switched settings and reapplied the sonic. For a moment nothing happened, and then an image slowly swam into focus. A girl was staring at them, a young girl, maybe eight or ten years old,
with long brown hair and brown eyes. They could see a room behind her, what looked like a typical
living room with couches and bookcases and paintings on the wall.

The Doctor stared at her. "Hello," he said.

"Hello," she replied and set her colored pencils down. "Are you on my television?"

"Well," he began, "no. No, I'm—sort of in space. I was trying to call up the data core of a triple-grid
security processor."

Rose groaned. "She's a kid, Doctor, and not even I know what you're talking about!

Her eyes widened in recognition. "You were in my library!" She pointed at the Doctor, Rose, and
Donna. "You, and you, and you!"

"Your library?" the Doctor asked.

"S never been on television before," the girl mused. "What have you done?"

"Nothing," he replied, looking and sounding a bit flustered.

Rose stepped forward. "Hello sweetheart," she said with a smile on her face. "Can we talk to your
mum or dad?"

The girl stood. "I can get my dad." She took her first step away—and the image faded. The Doctor
tapped furiously on the keyboard, but his only reward was the same 'access denied' screen Proper
Dave had been calling up.

"What was that?" River asked, apparently a bit shaken. "Who was that?"

"I need another terminal," the Doctor bit out and dashed across the room. "Keep working on those
lights!" he ordered. "We need those lights!"

"You heard him," River agreed. "Let there be light!" She followed him to the terminal behind the
curved desk, where she had spoken to Rose earlier. Her battered blue diary sat next to the keyboard.
The Doctor stared at it when he realized that it reminded him of the TARDIS—the cover was even
divided into blue panels, like the outside of his beloved ship. He stretched out his hand and picked it
up, but River took it from him.

"Sorry," she said, her voice harder than he'd heard so far. "You're not allowed to look in the book.
It's against the rules.

He scoffed. "Rules? Whose rules?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Yours." And then she walked away.

A book flew out of the wall and almost hit Anita in the face. "Oi!" she yelled. The Doctor and
Proper Dave both looked up.

"Wasn't me," Dave protested.

"Nor me," the Doctor concurred. More books began flinging themselves off of the shelves from
almost every direction. Donna narrowly dodged a few, and Rose took cover beside the terminal. The
Doctor tried to get into the system, to override whatever was attacking them, but it was no use. His
screen still read 'access denied,' but 'CAL' was written above that. "What's CAL?" he asked. No one answered. After a few minutes the books stopped—just stopped. Didn't taper off at all, they were just no longer attempting to brain anyone.

Miss Evangelista stood very still, although she twitched at every noise as if expecting a book to come hurtling through the air directly at her head. Donna went to her. "You okay?" she asked.

"What's happening?" the girl asked tearfully.

"I don't know," Donna replied, doing her best to be soothing. She was a personal assistant, for crying out loud, and not everyone was cut out for this life. "Thanks for offering to help with the lights," she told the girl.

Miss Evangelista smiled sadly. "They don't want me. They think I'm stupid because I'm pretty."

Donna frowned. "Well, that's not true. Rose is pretty enough, and she's right clever."

"I'm not." The girl hung her head. "They're right—moron, me. My father told me I have the I.Q. of plankton and I was pleased."

"That's funny!" Donna said, with a smile and a laugh. "See?"

Miss Evangelista looked confused. "But—I was serious. I was pleased. Is that funny?"

The smile slid off of Donna's face. "No, not at all. Books began to fly through the air again, and the girl clutched at Donna with a soft cry.

"What's causing it?" Rose asked the Doctor. "Is it that girl?"

"Who is she?" he wanted to know. "What's she got to do with this place?" He gestured at the Library around them.

The Doctor sat on the top of the desk, one leg out and one foot resting next to his knee. "How does the data core work?" he asked Mr. Lux. "What's the principal? What is CAL?" The others gathered around him in a loose circle.

Mr. Lux crossed his arms in front of him. "You didn't sign your personal experience contracts," he said belligerently.

The Doctor swung down from the desk and stalked over to the man. "Mr. Lux," he began, his voice eminently reasonable and just a bit dangerous. "Right now you're in more danger than you've ever been in your whole life, and you're protecting a patent?"

"I'm protecting my family's pride," he responded coldly.

The Doctor drew himself up to his considerable height. He was a stick, but he could be intimidating, Donna had to admit. "Funny thing, Mr. Lux," he said softly. "I don't want to see everyone in this room dead because some idiot thinks his pride is more important."

"So why didn't you sign his contract?" River asked with the ghost of a smile. The Doctor turned and stared at her. She held his gaze for a moment, and then the smile manifested fully. "I didn't either. I'm getting to be as bad as you two."

He decided to take a different approach. "Let's start at the beginning." He ran a hand through his
already wild hair. "What happened here, a hundred years ago? What physically happened on the actual day?"

"There was a message from the library," River said. "Just one: 'The lights are going out.' Then the computer sealed the planet and there was nothing for a hundred years."

Movement caught Miss Evangelista's eye and she turned her head. One of the wooden panels of the wall had slid away, and left in its place what looked like the beginning of a corridor. She stepped toward it uncertainly.

"It's taken three generations of my family just to decode the seals to get back in," Mr. Lux told them.

"Um, excuse me?" she tried.

"Not now," he dismissed her. She took another hesitant step forward.

"There was one other thing," River went on.

"That's confidential!" Lux snapped.

River pulled out a flat communication device with a screen that was a little larger than her palm. "I trust these people with my life," she replied flatly. "With everything."

"You've only just met them!" he protested.

She shook her head. "No, they've just met me." She held out the device and the Doctor took it.

"This might be important, actually," Miss Evangelista said again. She stood next to the opening, fairly dancing with urgency, but no one looked her way.

"In a moment," Mr. Lux said and refused to take his eyes off River. Miss Evangelista turned back to the opening and hesitantly stepped through. If no one was going to pay attention to her, she was going to find out what happened by herself. She wasn't completely useless, and she would prove it.

"This is a data extract that came with the message," she told the Doctor.

"4022 saved," he read. "No survivors."

"That's the exact number of people that were in the library when the planet was sealed."

"But what does it mean?" Rose asked.

River shook her head. "Haven't the foggiest. That's why we're here."

"How can 4022 people have been saved if there are no survivors?" Donna asked, frowning.

"Do you know what we haven't found?" Mr. Lux asked darkly. There was silence. "Bodies."

The corridor beyond the panel was dark and dusty and Miss Evangelista flinched away from the cobwebs than draped down from the ceiling. The silence seemed heavy, like it was pressing in on her. The passage opened onto another room, this one filled with desks that were piled high with books, and in the center, just beyond a pool of light, sat a large armchair. Something flickered around it and she drew near to it to get a closer look.
A scream shattered the quiet conversation. They whirled around, finally noticing what Miss Evangelista had, and bolted through the doorway.
Ghosts

Chapter Notes

Nothing you recognize belongs to me! Some dialogue taken from 'Silence in the Library.'

Donna's heart was pounding as she followed the Doctor and Rose down the dark hallway that had appeared seemingly at random. The air was musty and still, and it felt like the Library was holding its breath—or that it would, if it could breathe. The sound of blood rushing through her veins was loud in her ears—a drumbeat that was almost as loud as the rush of air into her lungs. The twisting corridor led to a room filled with tables that were piled high with books. There was a clear space in the center, and when the Doctor reached the chair that sat in the middle of the space he stopped. Donna almost crashed into him. The hand that held the torch was steady, but his jaw was set and the dimple that appeared when he was completely and totally furious materialized. She looked past him to what was making him so terribly angry and gasped. There was a skeleton sitting in the chair, a skeleton that was wearing the same spacesuit that River and her entourage were—but it was ripped to shreds, torn as if a wild animal had mauled the person. The bones, however, showed no sign of claw or teeth marks. They were perfectly intact—but pristine white, as if all the flesh had simply disappeared.

"Everyone, careful," he ground out. "Stay in the light."

"You keep saying that," Proper Dave commented. "I don't see the point."

The Doctor turned his glare on the man, who took a step back from the seething intensity in the alien's eyes. "Who screamed?" he asked, his voice clipped and angry.

Rose was very pale and her eyes were wide as she stared at the first body they had found. "This is where the scream was coming from," she said quietly. "It was that girl—what was her name?"

"Miss Evangelista," River supplied.

"Yes, well done." The Doctor's voice was scathing. "Where is she?"

River pressed a button next to a green light on the neck of her suit. "Miss Evangelista," she began, and her words were echoed—a copy of her voice from the suit in front of them. The Doctor pointed the torch at the suit. His expression was less than surprised. She tried again. "Miss Evangelista, please state your current—" Her voice trailed off as she approached the chair, reached behind the tattered suit and bare bones, and pulled out a piece of plastic. The same green light and button that decorated the neck of their suits, and apparently functioned as communication devices, adorned the piece in her hand. It was pitted and the edges of the break were rough, but it was not discolored. It looked ancient, but like the bones it was too clean to have been left from over a hundred years.

"Oh god," Rose whispered. "That's her."

"It's Miss Evangelista," River confirmed. She looked like she was going to be ill.

Her words were met with confusion. "We heard her scream a few moments ago," Anita protested.
"What could do that to a person in a few seconds?"

"Took a lot less than a few seconds," the Doctor replied.

Anita frowned. "What did?"

A voice rang out, preventing him from answering. "Hello?" It was a woman's voice, Donna realized, but none of the women present had spoken. It sounded like—but no, that was impossible. She was dead. They were staring at her body, so how could she be talking?

"Oh," River said, like she'd been punched in the stomach. "Oh, I'm sorry everyone, but this is going to be unpleasant. She's ghosting."

"She's what?" Donna asked harshly, tears standing in her eyes.

"Hello?" the voice came again. "Excuse me? I-I'm sorry, hello? Excuse me."


Proper Dave shifted. He looked incredibly uncomfortable. "I—I don't mean to sound horrible, but couldn't we just—?"

"This is her last moment," River replied, firmly but not unkindly. "No, we can't." She continued more sharply. "A little respect, thank you."

"Sorry," the voice said again, "but where am I? Excuse me."

"But, that's Miss Evangelista," Donna said again, her face blank and uncomprehending.

"She's a data ghost," River explained softly. Her eyes were dark with sorrow and pity but her voice was level. "She'll be gone in a moment." She pressed the comm button. "Miss Evangelista, you're fine. Just relax. We'll be with you presently." Her voice was level and calm, and betrayed nothing of what she felt.

"What's a data ghost?" Rose asked. Her eyes shone in the torchlight, but the tears did not fall, and her voice was even.

"There's a neural relay in the communicator," the Doctor replied. "Let's you send thought-mails." He focused the torch on the blinking green light attached to the plastic. "That's it, there. Sometimes it can hold the impression of a living consciousness for a short time after death, like an after-image." Rose looked back at the corpse and shuddered. The Doctor pulled her close to him and wrapped one arm around her.

"My grandfather lasted a day," Anita offered. A small smile curved her lips as she too fought back tears. "Kept going on about his shoelaces."

"I can't see," the voice said. "I can't—where am I?"

Proper Dave shook his head. "She's just brainwaves now; pattern won't hold for long."

"She's in there," Rose continued, half to herself. "She's in there and she's thinking."

"I can't see—I can't. I don't know what I'm thinking." The disembodied voice sounded surprised.

"She's a footprint on the beach," the Doctor said, and tightened his grip around Rose, "and the tide is coming in."
"Where's that woman?" the voice asked suddenly. "The nice woman—is she there?" They looked at each other, Mr. Lux and River Song, Anita and both Daves, the Doctor, Rose, and Donna.

"What woman?" Mr. Lux asked eventually.

Donna, who had fallen silent out of sheer horror, swallowed. "I think," she said slowly. "I think she means me."

"Is she there?" the voice asked again. "The nice woman?"

River pressed the button. "Yes," she told all that remained of Miss Evangelista. "She's here. Hang on." She fiddled with the button, and then nodded to Donna. "Go ahead, she can hear you."

"Hello?" the voice asked. "Are you there?"

Donna stood with her mouth open. She shook her head silently and glanced imploringly at the people around her.

"Help her," the Doctor commanded quietly.

"She's dead," Donna whispered.

He nodded. "Yeah." His voice was rough and his eyes were soft and filled with an obscure pain. "Help her."

The voice began again. "Hello? Is that the nice woman?"

"Yeah," Donna replied, her voice light although her heart felt anything but. "Hello, I-I-I'm here. You okay?"

"What I said about being stupid," the voice told her, "don't tell the others. They'll only laugh."

"Course I won't," Donna replied forcefully. Other Dave and Anita glanced at each other, and then away, ashamed.

"Don't tell the others, they'll only laugh," the voice repeated.

Donna blinked. "I won't tell them," she promised. "I said I won't." The voice repeated again. "I won't," Donna assured her. The tears were running unchecked down her cheeks, although she managed to refrain from sobbing. The voice repeated again.

"She's looping now," River offered. "The pattern's degrading."

"I can't think," the voice confessed. I—don't know. I—I—I—I Ice cream. Ice cream. Ice cream. Ice cream. Ice cream. Ice cream. Ice cream. Ice cream."

River stepped forward. "Does anyone mind if I—?" No one objected. She ripped the relay away from the pitted plastic and the green light blinked off.

"That—that was horrible," Donna murmured, still staring at the body. "That was the most horrible thing I've ever seen."

Rose moved out of the Doctor's embrace and hugged her friend. Donna clung to her and the Doctor rested a comforting hand on the ginger woman's shoulder.

River rubbed her thumb against the dead relay and slipped it into her pocket. "No," she countered
quietly. "Just a freak of technology." Her face hardened. "Whatever did this to her, whatever killed her—I'd like a word with that."

The Doctor's face was equally bleak. "I'll introduce you," he said, and then led them back the way they came.

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"I'm going to need a packed lunch," he said when they reached the relative safety of their base of operations.

River went to the packs. "Hang on," she called back. He shone the torch around the room and into the shadows, scanning for something they couldn't see. River knelt and Rose followed her. The older woman rummaged through the bag and pulled out the TARDIS book to get at the items beneath it.

"What's in that book?" Rose asked her intently.

She raised her head for a moment. "Spoilers," she said shortly, and then pulled out a metal box.

"Who are you?" Rose continued.

"Professor River Song, university of," she began, but Rose cut her off.

"Who are you to the Doctor?" she asked. "Who are you to me? Are you a future companion?" She paused. "Are you Jenny? Did you regenerate after we left?"

River sighed. "I'm not Jenny. As for the rest—like I said, spoilers." She held the box up. "Chicken and a bit of salad," she told the Doctor. "Knock yourself out."

He grabbed the box and handed it to Rose. "Right, you lot. Let's meet the Vashta Nerada."

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The Doctor lay on the floor and pointed the sonic screwdriver into the darkness. He swept it across the shadows, occasionally adjusting the frequency and setting. Rose held River's lunchbox and sat beside him. They were talking quietly. Every so often Rose would glance back at River with a frown on her face, but then the Doctor would ask her something and she would turn away.

River was watching them, and Donna was watching her. There was something—wistful about the older woman. A hint of a smile curved her lips as she watched the two of them.

"How do you like traveling with them?" she asked the ginger woman.

"It's the best thing that's ever happened to me," Donna answered sincerely. "Before I met him, my life was so—small. I was petty and so wrapped up in my own existence that I couldn't see what was happening all around me."

"It's eye-opening," River agreed. The two of them shifted, and the Doctor sat up.

"Proper Dave," he asked, "can you move a bit?"

Dave blinked at him. "What? Why?"

"Just over by the water cooler," Rose responded. "Please? It's important." He sighed but did as he was told.
"You know them," Donna guessed, and watched River's face carefully. The smile grew, and she knew she was right. "You know both of them."

"We go way back, the three of us," the older woman confirmed. "Just—not this far back. I know you, you know." She smiled at Donna. "In the future. I've met you quite a few times."

"What?" the ginger woman asked.

"They haven't met me yet," River clarified. "I'm from the future, their personal futures." Her face sagged, and she looked tired and worn down. "I sent them a message, like I always do, but it went a bit wrong this time. Communication via the vortex is—complicated. It arrived too early. This, this is the Doctor and Rose from before they knew me." Before she traveled with Rose and the Doctor, Donna would have said the woman was a nutter, but something in the other woman's voice gave her pause. There was pain underneath the affection and light humor. "And I know I should have seen this coming, I know it shouldn't bother me—but they look right through me and it shouldn't kill me but it does."

"You were close, then, sorry," Donna corrected herself. "Will be close?"

River nodded. "Imagine one day your parents woke up and had no idea who you were—people who were there when you were born, who watched you take your first steps and heard your first words, who made you into the person you are now."

A highly unlikely thought surfaced in Donna's mind. "You aren't, are you?" she asked. "You're not—their daughter?"

River laughed. "No, no, not really. But it's the closeness that's important."

Donna was silent for a moment. "That would be horrible."

"Can you two pipe down?" the Doctor asked, irritation laced through his voice. "I'm trying to work here."

After a few long, silent moments he sat up. "All right!" he declared. "We've got a live one." He stood, and turned to face the others. "That's not darkness down those tunnels. This," he gestured to the blackness behind him, "is not a shadow. Rose?" She held up the metal box, and he pulled out a chicken leg. "It's a swarm. A man-eating swarm." They gathered around him, torches shining into the darkness, as he crouched in front of the table. He tossed the chicken leg into the shadows—a bone hit the ground, a clean, white bone, completely free of any flesh. It took less than a second.

Almost as one, they gasped.

"Piranhas of the air," the Doctor explained. "The Vashta Nerada. Literally, 'the shadows that melt the flesh.' Most planets have them, but usually in small clusters. I've never seen an infestation on this scale, or this aggressive."

"Doctor," Rose began, "you don't mean they're on Earth, do you?"

He nodded. "Oh yes, Earth and a billion other worlds. Where there's meat, there's Vashta Nerada. You can see them sometimes, if you look: the dust in sunbeams."

"We would know if they're on Earth," Donna protested from her position behind River Song.
The Doctor shook his head. "Nah. Normally they live on road kill, but sometimes people go missing." His voice dropped down, became low and dangerous. "Not everyone comes back out of the dark."

River flashed her torch at the surrounding corridors. "Every shadow?" she asked, her eyes wide. "No," he replied in the same dark voice, "but any shadow."

"What do we do?" she asked.

He almost laughed. There was a sort of gallows mirth about him, now that they finally believed his predictions of danger and doom. And to think, it only took a death and a chicken leg to make them listen. "Daleks," he began, "aim for the eye-stalk. Sontarans—back of the neck." He turned to face her. "But Vashta Nerada?" He leaned forward, hands in his pockets, eyebrows pulled down over eyes that were deep and dark as wells. "Run. Just run."

"Run?" she replied incredulously. "Run where?"

He rocked back on the balls of his feet. "This is an index point. Must be a teleport somewhere." All eyes turned to Mr. Lux, who held up his hands in protest.

"Don't look at me," he told them. "I haven't memorized the schematics."

Rose was staring at the glass wall behind them. "Doctor," she began. "What about the shop? They always make you exit through the gift shop so you'll buy something."

He placed an exuberant kiss on her forehead. "Brilliant, Rose Tyler!" He grinned. "And that's why I love a little shop."

"Right, then," Proper Dave said. "Let's move it." He crossed the open circle of light.

"Actually, Proper Dave could you stay where you are for a moment?" the Doctor asked, and held up his hand. The other man stopped. "I'm sorry," he said as he approached the man. "I am so, so sorry—but you've got two shadows."

Rose looked down at the floor, and it was true. One shadow extended behind him, in the opposite direction of the light. The other stretched to the side. "It's how they hunt," the Doctor continued. "They latch on to a food source and keep it fresh."

"What do I do?" he asked softly, and she had to applaud his courage. His voice was level, as was his gaze. He kept his eyes fixed on the Doctor as they drew away from him, avoiding the darkness that pooled around him.

"You stay absolutely still," the alien responded, "like there's a wasp in the room—like there's a million wasps in the room. Where is your helmet?" When the man began to move he held out his hand. "Don't, just tell me."

"We're not leaving you, Dave," River said, her eyes also fixed on the Doctor.

"Course we're not," he responded lightly. "Now, your helmet?"

"On the floor by my bag," the man said quietly.

Other Dave went to fetch it. "Don't cross his shadow!" the Doctor snapped. Once the helmet was procured, the Doctor slid it over Proper Dave's head and fastened it with a click. "Helmets back on,"
he told the others, "and sealed up! We'll need everything we've got."

"But, Doctor," Donna pointed out, "we don't have helmets."

"Yeah, but we're safe," he replied.

Rose raised an eyebrow. "Really? How?"

He blinked. "Yeah—that was a clever lie."

"Doesn't work on me," she reminded him.

He rubbed his neck. "I know. Still, there's always hope. Professor, anything I can do with the suit?"

"What good are the suits?" Other Dave wanted to know. "Didn't help Miss Evangelista."

"We can increase the mesh density," River told him, "dial it up to 400%, make it a tougher meal."

The Doctor pressed the screwdriver to the hard plastic panel on the front of the suit. "800%," he replied, and went to hand her the sonic so she could continue. She reached into her pocket, and pulled out a sonic screwdriver of her own. It was like his—but not. It had a trigger, for one thing, and a wider head. The metal seemed to be brass, although it looked a bit tarnished. The Doctor stared at it.

"That's a screwdriver," he said.

"Yeah," she replied, and went to work.

"It's sonic," he continued.

"Yeah," she said again, and looked at him like he was being very thick intentionally. He watched her for a moment, and then grabbed Rose and Donnas hands.

"With me," he told them. "Come on!"

They were in the little shop, the little shop which, sure enough, contained a teleport. Three circular depressions on a raised platform sat next to a wooden booth in the back of the room. The Doctor released their hands and sprinted to the booth

"What are we doing?" Donna asked. "Shopping? Is it a good time to shop?" She spun around, taking in the bits and baubles that lined the shelves.

Rose kept her eyes on the Doctor. He studied the booth and began pressing buttons. She folded her arms across her chest and sent him a glare that was an impressive imitation of his ninth self's glower. "You're trying to get us out of the way." He did not answer her. "You're going to send us back to the TARDIS whilst you risk your neck out here."

He darted away from the booth and grabbed Donna by the shoulders. "No talking, just moving! Try it, right!" He bundled her on to the platform, although she fought him every step of the way. "Stand there in the middle of the teleport!" he barked, and she complied, stunned perhaps by the command in his voice. "Can't send the others—TARDIS won't recognize them, and the Dimension Canon can't carry them all."

"What are you doing?" Donna demanded.
"You don't have a suit," he replied shortly. "You're not safe."

"You're in just as much danger as we are," Rose pointed out. "You don't have a suit either, and I'm not leaving you!"

"Let me explain," the Doctor began, and then flipped a switch. Donna disappeared. He grinned. "That's how you do it!"

"Don't even think about it." Rose's voice was icy. She held up her wrist and pulled the sleeve of her hoodie down so that the Dimension Canon was visible. "You try and send me away, and I'll come back."

"Rose," he started, but she cut him off.

"No." Her voice was flat and allowed no argument. "I'm sticking with you, and that's it."

River's shout called them back into the main room. The others were standing around Proper Dave, who had only one shadow. The Doctor stared. "Where did it go?" he asked.

"It's just gone," the man replied. His voice sounded muffled and tinny through the suit's communication equipment. "I looked 'round, and there was only one shadow."

"Does that mean we can leave?" Anita wanted to know. "I don't want to hang about here."

Mr. Lux huffed. "I don't know why we're still here. We can leave him, can't we? No offense," he directed at Proper Dave.

"Shut up Mr. Lux," River said, as if she'd been saying it several times a day for many, many days. Rose wasn't quite sure how she refrained from strangling him. She couldn't stand people who were so self-absorbed.

"Did you feel anything?" The Doctor continued questioning Proper Dave. "Like, an energy transfer? Anything at all?"

He shook his head. "No, nothing. But look—it's gone?" He turned in place, but the Doctor held up a hand, his eyes wide.

"Stop it! Stop right there, stop moving." He ran a hand through his hair. "They're never just gone," he muttered, "and they never give up." He dropped to the floor and scanned the surrounding shadows. "This one's benign," he murmured, and moved to the next.

"Hey!" Proper Dave said suddenly. "Who turned out the lights?"

Rose looked around, a frown creasing her face. "No one," she told him. "They're fine."

"No, seriously," the other man continued, "turn them back on."

"They are on," River said slowly.

"I can't see a ruddy thing!" Dave protested.

The Doctor stood. "Dave," he instructed, "turn around."

"What's going on?" the man asked. "Why can't I see? Is the power on? Are we safe here?"
Chills ran down Rose's spine. Dave turned to face them. His visor was black.


The suit stopped shaking, and straightened slowly. "I'm—I'm okay," he told them. "I'm fine."

"I want you to stay absolutely still," the Doctor repeated.

"I'm fine," Dave told them. "I'm okay. I'm—I'm fine." He paused. "I can't—why can't I? I—I—I can't. Why can't I? I—I can't. Why can't I?"

Rose's eyes strayed to the green light attached to the neck of the suit—the neural relay. It was blinking on and off. "Oh," she said softly. "Oh, Dave."

"He's gone," River said. "He's ghosting."

"But," Mr. Lux asked, "then why is he still standing?"

"Hey!" the suit that had been Dave said, "who turned out the lights?" It repeated again: "Hey! Who turned out the lights?"

The Doctor was inching closer, trying to get a good look at the inside of Dave's visor. The suit was jerking just a bit, convulsing almost automatically, like he was nodding sharply, over and over again. Rose took a step forward. She wanted to yank him back away from the thing in front of them. He moved away from her, intent on the suit.

"Dave," he asked. "Can you hear me?" He took another step and the suit grabbed him. Rose surged forward but River held her back. She fought against the woman but she was strong, much stronger than she looked.

The Doctor fell to his knees, the suit's hands gripping his shoulders with bruising strength. As they struggled the suit jerked and a clean white skull thudded forward against the visor. "Hey, who turned out the lights!" the thing that had been Dave continued to repeat as it held the Doctor down.

"Anita!" River barked. The young woman grabbed Rose's arms and River darted forward. "Excuse me!" she snapped, and thrust her sonic screwdriver into the hard plastic plate on the front of the suit. It convulsed and the Doctor flung himself back and away.

"Back from it!" he yelled. "Get back, right back!" Anita released Rose and she grabbed his arm, steadying him as he flailed. The suit took a halting step forward and then another.

"Doesn't move very fast, does it," River commented. She was breathing hard, whether from fear or exhaustion Rose wasn't sure.

"It's a swarm in a suit," the Doctor replied incredulously. "But it's learning."

Shadows spread out from the thing's feet, six stretching in every direction, reaching toward them like fingers of darkness.

"What do we do?" Mr. Lux demanded. "Where do we go?"

River pulled something out of the suit near her hip. "See that wall behind you?" she asked, and aimed the device. "Duck!"
They moved, and a square hole appeared in the wall accompanied by a shrill sound. "A square nosed gun!" Rose yelled. She was grinning. "Just like old times!"

"Everybody out!" River ordered. "Go!" They bolted for the hole in the wall. The suit followed them, the shadows a vanguard heralding its approach.

They paused in the aisle outside the room. "You said not every shadow," River reminded him.

"Yeah," the Doctor admitted, "but any shadow!"

Behind them the swarm in a suit continued to advance. "Hey! Who turned out the lights!"

"Run!" Rose barked, and grabbed the Doctor's hand. They ran.
Dreams and Deceptions

Chapter Notes

Nothing you recognize belongs to me. Some dialogue taken from 'Silence in the Library,' and 'Forest of the Dead.'

After a breathless dash down aisles and through corridors, the Doctor skidded to a halt. Rose dropped his hand and leaned against the bookcases, breathing heavily. She was used to running for her life, but they'd been going flat-out for what seemed like hours. The swarm-in-a-suit, the thing that used to be Proper Dave, moved faster than she thought possible, especially after its first halting steps. She shuddered. Her instincts had been right on target—the Library was a tomb and a den all rolled into one.

The Doctor pulled out his sonic and buzzed it at one of the lamps overhead. Anita, Other Dave, and Mr. Lux were in much the same condition as Rose, worse, actually, as they were not used to so much running. River recovered relatively quickly and moved to assist the Doctor in manipulating the lamps. "Trying to boost the power," he told her. "Light doesn't stop them, but it does slow them down."

"So," she asked as she turned her own sonic screwdriver on another lamp. "What's the plan?" She seemed to think better of her words. "Do we have a plan?"


Said alien, however, was more interested in River's sonic device. "Your screwdriver," he said slowly, "looks exactly like mine."

River shrugged. "Well, with some improvements. It is yours. You gave it to me."

"I don't give my screwdriver to anyone." His voice was soft and certain.

"You've given it to me," Rose pointed out. "And your psychic paper."

He rolled his eyes. "You aren't anyone."

"Neither am I," River replied. "I didn't take it from your cold, dead fingers if that's what you're thinking." She pocketed the screwdriver after the light brightened. "What's the plan?"

He looked like he wanted to ask more questions, but he refrained. Whether it was because they were in a great deal of danger, or because he had finally realized that River wasn't going to give him any answers, Rose wasn't sure. "I teleported Donna back to the TARDIS," he explained. "If we don't get back there in under five hours emergency program one will activate."

Rose frowned at him. "You've still got that?"

He sighed. "Rose, when we're back in the TARDIS I will fight with you all night, if you'd like, about my emergency programs, but let's make sure we're alive to do that, all right?"

River glanced back the way they'd come. "We need to shift," she said urgently. "That thing's still out
He held up the sonic with a frown. "She's not there." His eyes were wide. "I should have received a signal. The console signals me when there's a teleport breach."

"Could the coordinates have slipped?" Rose asked. "The equipment here is at least a hundred years old."

The Doctor dashed to the end of the aisle, where one of the statues sat, its faceplate turned away. "Donna Noble," he demanded. "There's a Donna Noble somewhere in this library. Do you have the software to locate her position?"

With a soft whirring noise the statue came to life, and the smooth white plate turned to face the Doctor. He turned pale and took a step back. Donna's face was staring at him from the top of the statue.

"Donna Noble has left the library," the statue told him in her voice. "Donna Noble has been saved."

"Donna," he murmured, as the statue continued to repeat the two sentences. River's eyes were wide with shock, and Rose covered her mouth with her hand—a futile attempt to smother her gasp. She liked the ginger woman. Donna was funny and brave and had saved their lives on more than one occasion. And now she was dead.

They didn't have long to mourn. Another voice echoed from the shadows behind them. "Hey!" the swarm-in-a-suit cried. "Who turned out the lights!" Anita, Other Dave, and Mr. Lux broke into a run. The Doctor appeared as if he hadn't heard. He stood in front of the statue, grief radiating from him like heat from pavement on a summer's day.

Rose pulled at his hand. "Doctor, come on!" she said urgently. "We need to go!"

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "I'm so, so sorry." And then they ran.

They came, however, to a dead end. A shadow-that-wasn't-a-shadow crawled across the floor, blocking the end of the aisle, and the swarm-in-a-suit came at them from the other direction, boxing them in.

"What are we going to do?" River asked the Doctor. He did not answer. He was staring from one end of the aisle to the other, like a caged animal.

Rose grabbed the blaster that was holstered to River's side and pointed it at the bookcase across from her. She pulled the trigger and an off-center square hole appeared in front of them. "Everyone, this way!" she barked. "Move! Now!" She wasn't speaking as Rose Tyler, the Doctor's companion, she was speaking as Rose Tyler, Torchwood agent, and they obeyed almost without thought. She waited to go last, and then pressed the digital rewind button. She handed the blaster back to River, and then turned to glare at the Doctor. "The next time we're in Cardiff," she informed him, "you're going to apologize to Jack for ranting at him about his gun, as it came in quite handy then, and now." He managed to look abashed, but she didn't for one minute believe he actually was.

Donna Noble sat on a neatly made bed in a tidy room. She was wearing blue and white plaid, flannel pajamas, and had no idea how she'd gotten where she was. The last thing she remembered was standing on the teleport platform while the Doctor tricked her—tricked her!—into going away. From
what, she couldn't remember. She tried, she really did, but it all got fuzzy after that. There was someone else there, a blonde girl, Rose—her memory supplied, but beyond that and a feeling of kinship and general fondness for her, Donna was unsure as to who she was.

The room looked a little like a hotel room, but more like a room in a girl's dormitory. There were personal possessions scattered on various surfaces: her nightstand, the window ledge, the small table next to the comfy chair in the corner. The curtains were open and it was raining outside. There was a knock on her door and a tall, bald, black man in a suit stepped into the room. Donna stood and kept back from him warily.

"Hello, Donna," he said. He seemed friendly enough, and reassuring in the way that a kindly father or uncle would be.

She was not convinced. "Who are you then?" she asked sharply.

"I'm Dr. Moon," he replied. "I've been treating you since you came here two years ago."

She stared at him for a moment, and then gave a little laugh. "Oh," she said. "Doctor Moon! I'm so sorry." She rubbed her temples with the tips of her fingers. "What's wrong with me? I didn't know you for a minute." As soon as he spoke memories from the past two years came flooding back, and she relaxed. She was in her room, the room she'd had for the past two years. She was safe. She's suffered a sort of nervous breakdown—started having wild dreams that she'd believed were real. It had taken a lot of hard work and therapy, but she'd started to put all of that behind her.

He smiled at her. "And then you remembered. Shall we go for a walk?"

Donna blinked, and they were striding across the short green grass in front of the place she now called home. Dr. Moon was wearing a long black coat, and she sported a puffy burgundy jacket. It had stopped raining, and the sun was shining brightly down.

"No more dreams, then?" he asked, "about the Doctor and Rose and the blue box?"

She glanced about, confused. "How did we get here?"

Dr. Moon looked back at the looming building. "We came down the stairs and out the front door. We passed Mrs. Ali on the way out," he replied patiently.

Once again, as soon as he told her she remembered. "Yeah," she said. "Yeah, we did. I forgot that."

"And then you remembered," he agreed. "Shall we go down to the river?"

She blinked again, and there were ducks quacking energetically. The wind was cold against her face and bent the cattails that clustered about the edge of the water. "You said 'River,'" Donna asserted, "and suddenly we're feeding ducks." Something was off. She was about to continue when another voice cut through the air.

"Doctor Moon!" a dark-haired man carrying an assortment of fishing gear called. "Good morning."

"Donna Noble," Dr. Moon said, "Lee McAvoy."

She promptly forgot what she was worrying about, because Lee was, well, gorgeous. He had thick,
curly dark hair, brown eyes that twinkled with mischief, and a wide, generous smile. "Hello, Lee," she said coyly.

"Hello, D—d—d" he tried, but succeeded only in flushing with embarrassment.

"You've got a bit of a stammer there," she teased. "Bless." He took a deep breath and tried again, with the same results. "Oh, just skip to a vowel," she told him warmly. "They're easy." He laughed.

Once again she blinked and Lee was gone. She and Doctor Moon were back at the main building just outside the door to her room. Donna caught his arm with her hand as he turned to go. "How did we leave it?" she asked. "Him an' me, I mean."

"I got the impression he was inviting you 'fishing' tomorrow," Dr. Moon replied.

And then Donna was opening the door to Lee, who was dressed for a long day of sitting in the rain whilst she was dressed for a night on the town. Donna had never been fishing before, and she supposed that she would have been bored stiff, if Lee wasn't there. He had an umbrella, at least, and she perched on the cooler with their lunch while he occupied a collapsible stool.

"D—d—d," he tried, but she interrupted him.

"Gorgeous and can't speak a word." She grinned at him. "What am I going to do with you?"

Apparently she was going to marry him. The memories were there, and she ceased to be surprised when life moved in spurts and jumps, skipping over Sundays and Tuesdays and Wednesday mornings to get to Saturdays and Fridays and Monday evenings. It reminded her of something, of a dream that was like a memory from her childhood, but life was moving too quickly and she pushed the feeling aside.

They had two children, fraternal twins named Hazel and Arthur. For the first time in what seemed like forever, Donna was happy. Lee adored her and her children were challenging, but amazing at the same time. There was still something—off, like an itch at the back of her head, but she ignored it. She deserved to be happy, didn't she?

And then Dr. Moon came to visit, and everything changed. It was a normal checkup, until he went to leave. Hazel and Arthur ran through the house, and they talked about her life—how the kids were doing, where they were going for holiday, all the sort of meaningless chitchat that filled up every-day conversations.

He stood and wished her well—and then the Doctor appeared. He looked like a ghost, like a holographic projection, and he was holding the sonic screwdriver. "No," he said, "the signal is definitely coming from the moon. I'm blocking it, but it's trying to break through." His voice was hollow, like it was coming over a speaker system in an empty room, or from a long ways away. She stared, eyes wide, mouth open in shock. Then his eyes drifted forward. "Donna!" he exclaimed joyfully, and was gone.

Dr. Moon was back. He rubbed his stomach and made an excuse about 'Mrs. Angelo's rhubarb surprise,' but Donna didn't buy it.
"That was the Doctor," she whispered, and suddenly she was back in the Library. "I saw the Doctor!"

"Yes," Dr. Moon agreed. "And then you forgot."

And she did.

River aimed the blaster at the wall and poked her head into a large, circular, open room. Light pooled in the center beneath the massive skylight. "We've got a clear spot!" she called back. "In in in! Right in the center, don't let your shadows cross!"

The Doctor dropped to his knees and flashed the sonic at the shadows surrounding them. "Doctor?" Rose asked.

"I'm doing it," he replied evenly.

"Can you do it a little faster?" she inquired, glancing above them. "There aren't any lights here, and sunset's coming. We can't stay long."

He stopped scanning and shook the screwdriver. "Found a live one?" River asked.

"Maybe. It's getting harder to tell. " He glared at the screwdriver. "What's wrong with you?"

"Anyone have a chicken leg?" she asked the others. Dave held up a foil-wrapped package.

"Thanks," she told him, and gave it to the Doctor. He tossed it into the shadows. It was picked clean before it hit the ground. "We've got a hot one," she announced. "Watch your feet."

"They won't attack until there's enough of them," he declared, "but they've got our scent now. They're coming."

"Who are they?" Dave murmured as he watched Rose and the Doctor scan the rest of the shadows. Rose had River's screwdriver and found that it handled much like the Doctor's, although there were several settings she was unfamiliar with. That wasn't surprising, really, as it was from the future.

"You haven't even told us," Dave continued. "You just expect us to trust them."

River shrugged. "They're the Doctor and Rose."

"And who are 'the Doctor and Rose'?" Mr. Lux asked sarcastically.

"If you survive them, the only story you'll ever tell," she shot back. "The stuff of legends, and believe me, there are legends about them."

Anita took up the cause. "You say they're your friends, but they don't know who you are."

River's patience was wearing thin. "Listen," she said. Her voice was deadly serious, and there was a burning intensity in her eyes. "The only thing you need to know is this—I would trust them to the end of the universe, and actually, we've been."

"They don't act like they trust you," Anita observed. "Either of them."

"Small problem," River replied with a sardonic smile, "They haven't met me yet. But this is what they do." She gestured at the pair of them. "They're time travelers, and they haven't met me yet. All of my life—it's history for me, but it's the future for them." She left the others sitting in the light, and
moved to the Doctor on the edge of the shadows. He was holding the sonic screwdriver next to his ear and frowning. "What's wrong with it?" she asked.

"There's a signal coming from somewhere," he replied. "It's interfering with it."

"Rose, are you having problems?" she called to the other woman. Rose shook her head. River turned back to the Doctor. "So use the red settings."

"It doesn't have red settings," he protested.

"So use the dampers," she continued, as if he was thick.

He stared at her. "It doesn't have dampers!"

She nodded to where Rose was working. "It will do."

He followed her motion. "So, one day I'll just give you my screwdriver."

River shrugged. "Like I said, you were alive and you let it go willingly."

"And I know that because?" he asked scathingly.

She sighed. "Listen to me. I know you've lost your friend. You're angry, I understand; but you need to be less emotional, Doctor!"

He frowned. "I'm not emotional!"

"There are six people in this room, alive!" she exclaimed. "Focus on that! Dear God, you're hard work young! How did she ever put up with you?"

"Young?" he protested. "Who are you! You send Rose and I a message on the psychic paper, you claim to know us in the future, you somehow obtained my sonic screwdriver." He drew himself up and pulled the weight of his years around himself like a cloak. "Who are you, River Song?" he asked again.

She stared at him, eyes wide and perhaps a little frightened, but mostly terribly, terribly sad. "Doctor," she began, "one day I'm going to be someone that you trust completely, the both of you, but I can't wait for you to figure that out." She paused, regarding him solemnly. "And I'm sorry, I'm really very sorry." Then she put a hand on his shoulder, stood on her tip toes, and whispered something in his ear.

The effect her murmurings had on the Doctor was instantaneous and startling. He stared at her, eyes wide, his face set in lines that made him look far, far older than usual. There was knowledge in those eyes, knowledge that burned and she found herself unable to meet his gaze. "Are we all right?" she asked, her own eyes fixed on the floor.

"Yeah," he choked, as if his mouth was unwilling to move. "Yeah, we're good."

"Good," she said softly, and moved back to stand with the others. His eyes followed her, burning.

Rose watched the two of them. There was a tightness in her stomach that could only be fear—but it wasn't fear of the Vashta Nerada, it was the creeping, sinking terror that had permeated her when he'd left her stranded in the 51st century whilst he ran off to save Reinette. It was the knowledge, the certainty, that something terribly important was happening and she wasn't part of it. It was a glimpse
of the future—without her.

The Doctor seemed to shake off whatever mood had accompanied her words. "Know what's interesting about my screwdriver?" he asked loudly as he strode into the center of the light. "Very hard to interfere with. There's practically nothing strong enough—well—except for a few types of hairdryer, but I'm working on that. So! There is a very strong signal coming from somewhere and it wasn't there before—so what's new? What's changed?" There was silence. "Come on!" he demanded. "What's new? What's different?"

"I dunno," Dave replied, attempting to watch the Doctor as he paced in a circle around them. "It's getting dark?"

The Doctor shot him a disdainful glare. "It's a screwdriver. It works in the dark."

Rose glanced up at the skylight. "Moonrise," she noted.

The Doctor followed her gaze. "Yes!" he yelled, and everyone jumped. "Or no, but—yes! Moonrise!" He flashed her a grin. "Brilliant as usual, Rose Tyler." He turned to Mr. Lux. "Tell me about the moon."

"It's not real," the man replied. "It was built as part of the library. It's just a Doctor Moon."

The alien leaned forward. "And what's a Doctor Moon?"

Mr. Lux shrugged. "A virus checker. It supports and maintains the main computer at the core of the planet."

The Doctor aimed his screwdriver up and activated it. "Well," he mused. "It's still active. Still signaling. Someone, somewhere in this library is still alive and communicating with the moon—or possibly drying their hair." He brought the sonic closer to his ear and adjusted the frequency. "Nope. The signal is definitely coming from the moon. I'm blocking it, but it's trying to break through."

River turned and gasped. The image of Donna Noble stood in front of them. She was partly transparent, like a bad hologram. "Doctor!" she gasped.

He turned. "Donna!" he exclaimed, but then the moon's signal overpowered the screwdriver, and she was gone.

"That was her!" Rose cried. "That was Donna! Can you get her back?"

He adjusted the sonic again. "Hold on, hold on! I'm trying to find the wavelength!"

Behind him, Anita was staring at the floor. A pair of teardrops spilled over her eyes and wound down her cheeks to drip off her jaw.

"Arg!" he yelled. "I'm being blocked!"

"Professor?" she asked shakily.

"Just a moment," River replied. Her attention, like the others' was fixed on the Doctor.

"It's important," Anita said, and looked up. "I have two shadows."

They froze for an instant, and then whirled around. "Alright," River ordered, "helmets on, everyone."
Anita, I'll get yours."

"Didn't do Proper Dave any good," the girl observed.

River knelt and picked up the girl's helmet. "Let's just keep it together, okay?"

Anita laughed. "I'm keeping it together. I'm only crying. Under the circumstances, I don't think that's an overreaction." River slid the helmet on carefully and twisted it until it clicked into place. The Doctor approached cautiously and waved the screwdriver over the helmet's visor. It darkened immediately.

Rose gasped. "Have they got in?"

He shook his head. "Just tinted the visor—maybe they'll think they're already inside."

River blinked. "You think they can be fooled like that?"

He shrugged. "Maybe. Don't know. It's a swarm, it's not like we chat." He glanced around the room, and motioned to Dr. Song. "Professor, quick word." He knelt at Anita's feet.

"What?" River asked.

"Before, you said there are six people still alive in this room," he began. She nodded. "So why are there seven?" Her eyes widened, and she turned. There was a fifth suited figure standing against the bookshelves in the back of the room.

"Hey!" the swarm-in-a-suit exclaimed, "who turned out the lights!"

"Run!" he yelled, and they took off through one of the corridors branching off of the room. The swarm followed them relentlessly.

Donna stared at the beds that had contained her children. It all started when the Doctor managed to replace Dr. Moon, somehow. She remembered now, the Library, and Rose, and the people they were trying to save. She remembered because what was left of Miss Evangelista—the badly transcribed remnant of a data ghost caught in the Library's wifi, had opened her eyes. And now that she remembered, her grip on this world, the world of CAL, was failing. Her children were gone, cut loose because she no longer believed absolutely in them. It wasn't real, none of it was real—but it felt real. Her life, this life, felt real and the Doctor and Rose and the TARDIS felt like a dream. She stared at the empty beds, frozen in shock. The world is wrong. She wanted to wake up.

The Doctor slid to a halt and released Rose's hand. "Professor," he called to River, "go ahead and find a safe spot."

"It's a carnivorous swarm in a suit!" Rose exclaimed. "You can't reason with it!"

"I've got to try," he replied. "Go with them, please."

"I'm not leaving you!" she protested.

"Please, Rose. Just this once."

He was looking at her with those kicked-puppy eyes, the ones she could never resist, and she
groaned. "Fine, but you'd better follow."

"Stay with him, Dave," River ordered. "Pull him out when he's too stupid to live." And then they were gone. The door slammed open, and the swarm-in-a-suit took halting steps into the corridor.

"Hey!" it exclaimed. "Who turned out the lights!"

"Do you hear that?" the Doctor replied. "Those words are the very last thought of the man that wore that suit, before you climbed inside it and stripped away his flesh. That's a man's soul, trapped inside a neural relay going around and around forever." He was being forced back, walking backwards as the suit continued to draw near to him. "If you don't have the decency to let him go, how about this —use him to talk to me. It's easy," he continued. "Neural relay, just point and think."

"Hey!" the suit repeated. "Who turned out the lights!"

"Vashta Nerada live on all the worlds in this system but you hunt on forests." He frowned. "What are you doing in a library?"

Dave glanced about. "We should go, Doctor!"

The Doctor waved at him. "In a minute." The suit kept advancing, and he kept stepping back, keeping a good distance between them. "You came to a library to hunt, why? Just tell me why!"

The suit paused. "We," it began. "We did not."

"Oh," the Doctor replied with a predatory smile. "Hello."

"We did not," the suit continued.

"Take it easy," he advised the thing. "You'll get the hang of it. Did not what?"

Its speech was halting, like its first steps. "We did not come here."

The Doctor did not believe them—it. "Of course you did," he scoffed. "Of course you came here."

"We come from here," the suit asserted. "We hatched here."

"But you hatch from trees, from spores in trees," the Doctor pointed out.

"These are our forests," the suit declared.

"You're nowhere near a forest," he replied. "Look around you."

The suit's response did not change. "These are our forests."

The Doctor was losing patience. "But you're not in a forest! You're in a library! There are no trees in a—" And then he paused. His eyes widened in understanding. "Oh—the books."

"We should go, Doctor!" Dave repeated.

The Doctor was not listening. "You came in the books. Microspores in a million, million books."

Dave tried again. "We should go, Doctor!"

"Oh," the Doctor murmured and ran a hand through his hair. "Look at that. The forests of the Vashta Nerada, pulped and printed and bound. A million million books hatching shadows."
"We should go, Doctor!"

Something clicked in the Doctor's mind, and he turned to his companion. The visor of Other Dave's suit was inky black. "Oh," he said. "Oh, Dave, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." The suits began to advance, and the Doctor maintained his position between them. "Thing about me," he told them, "is I'm stupid. I talk too much—just ask Rose. Always running my gob, she says. Want to know the only reason I'm still alive, besides, of course, that my beautiful companion would rather rip apart the universe than let me die?" He pulled out the sonic screwdriver. "Always stand near the door." Then he pointed it at the floor below. Two wooden panels opened and he fell through.

River held her screwdriver loosely as she scanned the edges of the circular room they'd found. Anita stood behind her and Mr. Lux sat off to the side. Rose stood, arms wrapped around herself, staring back the way they'd come. She was waiting for the Doctor.

It was strange, seeing two people she knew so intimately like this. The Doctor and Rose that she knew were there, just below the surface. It felt like if she waited just a little longer she'd see them again. She knew she wouldn't. This was the last time. She'd known it was coming, but it still ate away at her. She loved the life they led, and she wouldn't change anything, not for the world, but she didn't want it to end.

"It's funny," she said softly, "but I keep wishing the Doctor and Rose were here."

"They are here, aren't they?" Anita asked. "The Doctor—he's coming back, right?"

River stood and faced her. She was tired, god she was tired, and she felt the weight of the time traveler's burden pressing down on her like a boulder from above. Was this how he felt when they went to Pompeii? "You know when you see a photograph of someone you know from years before you knew them? It's like—they're unfinished, they're not done yet. Well," she continued. "Yes, they're here. They came when I called, like they always do—but they're not my Doctor and Rose."

A smile crept onto her face. "Now, the Doctor and Rose that I know—Time's Champion and the Bad Wolf—I've seen whole armies turn and run. I've seen them do the impossible over and over again—reorder time itself." She paused. "The Doctor and Rose Tyler in the TARDIS, as it should be."

A hand closed over her shoulder and she spun around. The Doctor was there, his face bleak and his eyes burning. "Spoilers," he gritted out through clenched teeth. "The Bad Wolf is gone. I took it out of her—all of it."

River cocked an eyebrow at him. "Sure of that, are we? How long did you last with the Vortex in you, Doctor? And how long did she?" He frowned. "Not a coincidence," River informed him, but then Rose had caught sight of him and he was distracted, pulled away before he could ask her what she meant. Other Dave, she noted, was not with him, and her heart clenched. So many lost; death and the Doctor were old friends.

"How are you doing?" he asked Rose. She pulled him away, to the edge of the circle.

"What did she say to you?" she asked. "You didn't trust her at all, and then she whispered something and all of a sudden you do." She crossed her arms in front of her. "And that's not a little suspicious?"

The Doctor ran a hand through his hair. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "My name," he
said finally. "She told me my name. My real, proper name." Rose stared at him blankly and he sighed. "Names—are important to Time Lords. Did you ever wonder why everyone calls me 'the Doctor'?

She shrugged. "Figured it was a Time Lord thing."

"It is." His eyes were far away, but his tone was all business. "I chose 'the Doctor,' just like the Master chose his name and the Rani chose hers—haven't told you about her, have I?" She shook her head. "Not a pleasant person. But anyway, my name is the most powerful distillation of who I am, and there's power in knowing it. It's closer to what some people would call a 'true name' than the more everyday designation of 'the Doctor.' That, as they say, is 'old magic.' Really it's not magic, it's science, but it looks like magic because human beings aren't capable of channeling psychic energy like, oh say a Carrionite, who could use names to kill." He paused and shoved his hands in his pockets. He was tense, like there was something else, something unpleasant.

"So how does she know your name, if it's so dangerous?" Rose wanted to know.

He winced. "There's only one occasion when a Time Lord can reveal his name. Outside of that instance it's literally impossible." He swallowed. "Names are exchanged during the marriage ceremony. It's symbolic, you know, giving the other person yourself and all that."

Rose was silent for a long moment. She was clever, and he knew she'd made the connection. "So," she said finally, "she's your wife from the future." He didn't answer. There was no answer, not really. God, was this how Sarah Jane felt when she ran into them at that school? No, Rose realized, this is how Sarah Jane would have felt if she had run into her and the Doctor when Rose was hopping through time, attempting to get back. It was awful, but at the same time, she'd known. In the back of her head, she knew that even with her extended lifespan he would probably outlive her—she was too jeopardy-friendly by half. "That's good," she forced herself to say, even though it felt like her heart was breaking.

He reached out to her. "Rose—"

She shook her head. "That's good." She let his fingers slide down her arm until the twined with hers, and she rested her other hand against his face. "Don't be alone, Doctor. I never want you to be alone." The fear that settled at the bottom of her stomach hardened, a constant ache that pressed down on her chest and made it hard to breathe. Later, she could fall apart later. Now they needed to concentrate on making sure there was a later.
Ouroboros

Chapter Notes

Nothing you recognize belongs to me! Some dialogue taken from 'Forest of the Dead.'

Rose pulled back and the Doctor fought the urge to follow her. He ached to hold her, to tell her that there was another way (even though that was a lie). He wished that he could tell Rose that River was from the far future, from after she was dead, but the woman knew them, both of them, and had expected to see both of them. It didn't make any sense. He wasn't exactly the marrying type, not after what had happened with his first marriage, but if he were to bind himself to anyone, it would be Rose.

"Where's Other Dave?" Anita asked from across the room.

The Doctor left Rose's side to stand in front of the young woman. "He's not coming. Sorry."

"If they've taken him," she continued, "why not me?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Maybe tinting your visor's making a difference."

Anita laughed. The Doctor admired her spirit. She was calm and collected in the face of death. She was taking it better than almost anyone he'd ever met—except for Rose. His thoughts winged back to a cellar in Cardiff, but Anita's voice pulled him back to the present. "No one's ever gonna see my face again."

"Can I get you anything?" he asked, wanting to be of some use. He'd really never felt more useless in his life, except maybe holding on to that lever and watching her fall.

"An old age would be nice," Anita joked, although it wasn't a joke, not really. "Anything you can do?"

He nodded. "I'm all over it." He turned to go, but she called him back.

"Doctor!" He turned around to face her. "When we first met you and Rose, you didn't trust Professor Song, but then she whispered something in your ear, and you did." She paused. "My life so far—I could do with a word like that. What did she say?"

He was silent.

"Give a dead girl a break," Anita asked in that same joking tone. "Your secrets are safe with me."

The Doctor looked like he was going to say something, and then stopped. "Safe," he repeated, and Rose knew that he had some brilliant idea going.

"What?" Anita asked, confused.

"Safe," he said again. "You don't say 'saved,' no one says 'saved,' you say 'safe!'" He whipped his head around at Mr. Lux. "The data fragment, what did it say?"
"4022 people saved," Mr. Lux told him. "No survivors."

Rose stepped forward. "Doctor?"

"Nobody says 'saved,'" he repeated, and began to pace. "Nutters say 'saved,' you say 'safe,' but see, it didn't mean to say 'safe,' it meant, it literally meant—saved!" He dashed over to the console at the edge of the circle of light. Rose, Mr. Lux, and River followed him. "See there?" he asked and gestured at the screen. "One hundred years ago—massive power surge, all the teleports going at once. The Vashta Nerada hit their hatching cycle; they attack. Someone hits the alarm. The computer tries to teleport everyone out."

"It tried to teleport 4022 people?" River asked, one eyebrow raised.

"It succeeded," the Doctor corrected. "Beamed them all out, but where to go? Nowhere safe in the whole library—Vashta Nerada growing in every shadow. So they're stuck in the system, waiting to be sent like emails. So what's a computer to do? What does a computer always do?"

Rose grinned. "It saved them."

The Doctor's grin matched hers. "The only way a computer can—it saved them to the hard drive."

He pushed aside the books on one of the nearby tables and pulled a permanent marker out of his pocket. He drew a small circle and a larger circle around it. "The library," he denoted the outer circle, "a whole world of books, and right at the core—" He drew an 'x' through the small circle. "Right at the core is the index to everything ever written, the biggest hard drive in history—and that's where the computer saved them. It stored them as energy signatures, ready and waiting to be released."

An alarm blared. Red lights flashed and the console locked down. "What is it?" Mr. Lux demanded. "What's wrong?"

"Autodestruct enabled in twenty minutes," an automatic voice said over the loudspeaker. Where there had been a graph of energy use displayed on the console, there was a ticking clock.

"What's maximum erasure?" River asked, her eyes on the dwindling numbers.

"Twenty minutes," the Doctor replied, "and this planet's going to crack like an egg."

Rose held the his hand. "You can fix it, right Doctor?" she asked. "Sonic's great for hacking."

"The Doctor Moon will stop it," Mr. Lux asserted. "It's programmed to protect CAL."

Then the console flickered and died. "No!" the Doctor yelled. "No, no, no, no!" He banged the side of the screen, but nothing happened. He climbed around the back of the wooden booth and turned the sonic on it from above. River pulled hers out and aimed it at the screen.

"All library systems are permanently off line," another automatic voice stated. "Sorry for the inconvenience."

"We need to stop this!" Mr. Lux declared. "We have to save CAL!"

"What is it?" the Doctor demanded. "What is CAL?"

He looked like he wanted to stonewall them again, but then he relented. "We need to get to the main computer," he told them. "And then I'll show you."

Rose frowned. "But that's at the core of the planet!"
River smiled. "Well then, let's go." She moved to the center of the room, to a circular panel of brass with a strange, wave-like design over it. She aimed her sonic at it, and the panel separated into two halves and withdrew. A pillar of bluish light stretched to the ceiling, and a metal platform hovered inside the circle. "Gravity platform," she explained.

The Doctor grabbed Rose's hand and bounded over, followed closely by Mr. Lux. "Bet we like you," he observed.

"Oh, you do," River replied with another grin.

The data core was a pulsing red ball surrounded by a swirling force field. It looked, Rose thought, like all the pictures of the Earth's core in her geography textbooks. The light was dusky red in the main computer room. The alarm was quieter, although an automatic voice periodically warned them of their dwindling time.

"There are over 4000 living minds trapped in that data core," the Doctor said.

"They won't be living for much longer unless we get them out," River noted. They dashed down a side corridor and found the primary access point. It was a group of four consoles, back to back like a compass rose.

"Help me," a voice said, "please help me."

Rose looked around wildly. "Is that a child?" she asked. "Is there a child down here?"

The Doctor was typing on the keyboard. "Computer's in sleep mode," he noted. "I'm trying to wake it up, but so far nothing's working." He pulled his brainy specs out of his suit pocket and slid them on.

River frowned. "Doctor, these readings—it's almost like it's dreaming, but machines don't dream."

Mr. Lux stepped forward, his helmet in one hand. "No," he agreed, "but little girls do. It's dreaming of a normal life and a lovely dad and of every book ever written." He pulled a lever on one of the panels surrounding the booths, and a mesh door rose.

"Help me," the voice continued. "Please help me."

They followed Mr. Lux through the door and into what looked to be a secret room. One of the strange statues was standing in front of them, and when it turned its faceplate toward them they saw that it was a little girl who was calling for help.

"Oh my god," River murmured.

"It's the girl," Rose realized, "the one we saw in the computer!"

"She's not in the computer," Mr. Lux corrected. "In a way, she is the computer—the main command node." He brushed the back of his hand against her cheek tenderly. "This is CAL."

"CAL is a child?" the Doctor asked incredulously. "A child hooked up to a mainframe? Why didn't you tell me this? I needed to know this!" He was glaring at Mr. Lux. If he had known—he could have behaved differently, maybe figured out what was going on when they first saw the little girl, and not after three people were dead.
"Because she's family!" Mr. Lux yelled back. "CAL—Charlotte Abigail Lux, my grandfather's youngest daughter." There was stunned silence from all and sundry. "She was dying," Mr. Lux continued. "So he built her a library and put her living mind inside, with the moon to watch over her and all of human history to pass the time. Any era to live in, any book to read." He smiled softly. "She loved books more than anything, and he gave her them all. He only asked that she be kept a secret—left in peace, not used as a freak show."

"So you weren't protecting a patent," the Doctor said softly. "You were protecting her." He thought better of Mr. Lux, even if he was tangentially responsible for three deaths. He knew a little bit about trying to protect those that you love. Rose too felt her heart go out to him. What wouldn't she do for her family?

"This is only half a life, of course," Mr. Lux told them, "but it's forever."

The Doctor pushed himself off the wall he'd been leaning against. "But then the shadows came."

"The Shadows," CAL repeated. "I—I have to save."

"She saved them," he continued. "Saved everyone in the library—folded them into her dreams and kept them safe." There was wonder in his voice, and sadness.

"But why didn't she tell us?" Anita asked.

"She's forgotten," the Doctor responded before Mr. Lux could take offense. "She's got over 4000 living minds chattering away inside her head. It must be like being, well, me."

Rose bumped his shoulder. "Rude," she reminded him without heat.

"So what do we do?" River wanted to know.

"Autodestruct in ten minutes," the mechanical voice reminded them.

The Doctor dropped Rose's hand and dashed over to one of the panels of computer circuitry. "Easy!" he declared. "We beam all of the people out of the data core. The computer will reset and stop the countdown." He whirled around and typed something on the console. The computer's answer was not good. He frowned and clutched at his hair with one hand. "Difficult—Charlotte doesn't have enough memory space left to make the transfer." His eyes slid across the computer equipment scattered around them, and he made a beeline for one instrument hidden behind a glass doors. "Easy!" He pulled out something that looked like a cross between a headband and a Direllian mindwiping machine. "I'll hook myself up to the computer—she can borrow my memory space."

River moved towards him, but Rose was already there. "That'll kill you!" she yelled. "Fry your brain, and I don't care how superior your biology is to humans. No one could survive that!"

"I've got the best chance," he told her. "I might just regenerate."

"You've got no chance," she snapped back, "cause you're not doing it!"

"You'll burn up both your hearts!" River put in. "And you won't regenerate!"

Rose made a grab for the thing in his hands. "Don't make me fight you, Doctor," she said and pulled out her gun. She aimed the snub-nosed barrel at him. "Don't make me do it."

He stopped what he was doing and stared at her. "You'd shoot me?" he asked, his voice even.
"To stop you from killing yourself," she replied, "in a heart's beat."

He set the device down. "Then I'm sorry, Rose. I'm really, very sorry." Before she could react he pulled his sonic screwdriver from his sleeve, where he'd hidden it earlier, and aimed it at the Dimension Canon strapped to her wrist. She vanished in a flash of light.

"She really doesn't like it when you do that," River reminded him.

The Doctor pocketed his sonic. "As long as she's alive to be angry at me," he said grimly, "I don't care."

"When are you going to accept that other people might know better than you do?" the woman asked him, exasperation heavy in her voice.

"I'm the Doctor!" he told her. "I'm the highest authority. If you're looking for someone to go complain to, there isn't one, because it ends with me!" He grabbed the device. "Now, you and Luxy-boy back up to the main library. Prime any data cells you can for maximum download, and before you say anything else, professor, can I just mention in passing as you're here—shut up!" Then he dashed away back to the control console.

"Oh!" she huffed. "I hate you sometimes!"

"I know!" he replied snidely.

She stormed over to where Mr. Lux was waiting with Anita. "With me!" she snapped at him. "And Anita, if he dies, I'll kill him myself!" Then the two of them dashed off.

"What about the Vashta Nerada?" Anita asked as he danced between console and equipment, flicking switches and twisting dials.

"These are their forests!" the Doctor replied. "I'm going to seal Charlotte inside her world and take everybody else away. The shadows can swarm to their hearts' content."

"So you think they're just going to let us go?" she wanted to know.

"Best offer they're gonna get." He stuck his head inside one of the glass-covered sections.

"You're going to make them an offer?" Amusement dripped from her voice.

The Doctor pulled himself back out. "They'd better take it," he said viciously. "Because right now I'm finding it hard to make any kind of offer at all. 'Cause you know what?" He moved back to the console and turned to stare straight at her. "I really liked Anita." His face was thunderous. "She was brave, even when she was crying" \textit{like Rose was with the Dalek} "and she never gave in—and you ate her." He buzzed the sonic at the thing that had been Anita, and the visor cleared. A bleached skull looked back at him. "But I'm going to let that pass," he continued. "Just as long as you let them pass."

"How long have you known?" the swarm asked.

He sneered. "I counted the shadows. You only have one now." He glanced to the neural relay on the neck of the suit. It was down to one bar and flickering. "She's nearly gone now." His voice was soft. "Be kind."
"These are our forests," the swarm replied. "We are not kind."

His face hardened, and if the swarm had eyes to see it would have flinched back in fear from the fury in his eyes. "I am giving you back your forests," he said, his voice deadly dangerous. "But you are giving me them. You are letting them go." He turned away, back to his work.

"These are our forests," the swarm told him. "They are our meat." It stretched out the suit's hand and shadows spread front in front of it.

The Doctor glanced down, but seemed untroubled as the darkness grew nearer. If anything, he was angrier. There was a mad light in his eyes, the kind that had surfaced when he hovered over the pit on the impossible planet. "Don't play games with me," he told the swarm. He was fire and ice, danger and destruction—he was the thunder and lightning, the tornado's winds—he was the sea in a hurricane and the heart of a volcanic eruption. He was over a thousand years old, and it showed. "You just killed someone I like," he informed the Vashta Nerada in a voice like the cracking of a glacier and the roar of an avalanche. "That is not a safe place to stand! I'm the Doctor," he continued. "And you're in the biggest library in the universe." He leaned in. "Look me up."

The swarm paused, and then retreated. He continued to stare at it with eyes that reflected starfire. "You have one day," it informed him, and then it collapsed.

River Song left Mr. Lux priming the data cells and returned to the main computer room at the heart of the planet. A strange kind of crystalline calm had settled over her. She knew what she had to do. If the Doctor went ahead with his plan he would die. If he died now the results would be catastrophic. There were fixed points in time that hadn't yet been fulfilled—and she'd seen what happened when a fixed point was altered.

She knew that he wouldn't like her plan, but really, she didn't care. She had changed the time line for him (and for Rose, but he didn't know that) and she wasn't about to let him negate her sacrifice—even if she didn't remember it most of the time. Being at the center of an altered timeline was—odd. River took a deep breath and ran into the control room.

Anita was crumpled on the floor. The Doctor was working at one of the consoles. "Oh!" River cried and knelt beside her.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "She's been dead a while now." He paused, as if noticing her for the first time. "I told you to go!" he snapped.

"Lux can manage without me." She tried to keep her voice level, but some of the tears that were collecting in her eyes had crept in, and there was a waver in her speech. She took a breath and reached for the steel she knew she possessed. "But you can't." He was turned away from her. It was now or never. She moved to stand beside him. He turned, probably to tell her off, and she decked him in the face.

It took Rose longer than she liked to fix the Dimension Canon. The sneaky bastard had randomized the controls in an attempt to keep her from jumping, but the TARDIS had shown her one of his workrooms and she raided his spare sonic to undo the damage. In the process she'd run through every curse she knew (and there were quite a few—her misspent youth on the Powell Estate was good for something) and when she exhausted that supply she went back and started over in Mandarin. How many times did she have to slap him before he got it through that thick skull and into
his enormous brain that they were partners, and partners did not send each other away? If he was still alive when she found him she was going to kill him, or at the very least, make him regenerate. Maybe the next incarnation would understand that Rose Tyler knows what she wants, and can handle whatever he can.

She was geared up for a full-out fight with the Doctor when she reappeared in the control room, but what she saw gave her pause. The Doctor was unconscious and handcuffed to the control console, which was a good distance from where River Song sat, twisting wires together and feeding them into the strange metal headband.

"Stop," Rose said. She didn't want to. Really, she wanted to let River get on with it and go her merry way with the Doctor. She knew, though, that she couldn't. Not when River was—yes. Well. "What are you doing?"

River glanced up. "Don't you hate when he does that? Honestly, I don't know how you put up with this one. I thought you said he was better at letting you stay that the other one."

"He needs to be reminded every-so-often," Rose acknowledged with a shrug. "But you didn't answer my question."

River was silent for a few moments. "If he did this, he would die. His hearts would burn up and his brain would liquefy and he wouldn't regenerate. That can't happen. The universe needs the Doctor."

"So let me."

"Time can be rewritten," Rose replied softly.

River shook her head. "Not those times, not one line. If you do this there will be worse than Reapers, Rose. All of time will disintegrate. There are fixed points ahead, in his personal future and yours."

Behind her the Doctor began to stir. "River!" he barked when he saw them. "What are you doing? That's my job!"

"And what, I'm not allowed to have a career?"

He glared at her. "Why am I handcuffed? Why do you even have handcuffs?"

River was smiling, although her eyes were full. "Spoilers," she told him smugly.

"Rose," he said in his best Doctor-voice, "let me loose."

"Why?" she asked him.

"So that I can do what needs to be done."

Rose snorted. "You aren't the only person who can save the world, Doctor."

"I'm the only one who'd have a chance!" he snapped. "She doesn't have any!"

"You wouldn't have a chance!" River replied harshly. "And neither do I! No one does." There was
silence for a moment as she made a minute adjustment to one of the cables. "I'm timing it for the end of the countdown. There will be a blip in the command flow—should improve our chances of a clean download." He opened his mouth to say something, but she continued on. "It's funny, really. This means that both of you have always known. Every time I saw you, was this at the back of your minds?" She blinked and tears carved tracks down her cheeks. "The last time I saw you—the you that I know, you showed up at my door with a new suit and a haircut." She smiled tearfully. "And you," she said to Rose, "were wearing a little black dress and the most gorgeous pair of red heels. We went to Darillium to see the singing towers. It was—magical. The towers sang," she told the Doctor, "and you cried. You wouldn't tell me why." She was smiling at them again, a secretive smile that hinted at greater knowledge. "A Time Lord only tells his wife his name—but who said I learned it from him?"

They stared at her. "Do you mean—" Rose began, but River shook her head.

"Spoilers," she told them.

"Autodestruct in thirty seconds," the automatic voice reminded them.

The Doctor strained at the cuffs, desperately trying to grab the sonic screwdrivers—his and hers—that lay just beyond his reach. "There has to be another way!"

"There isn't." She set the headband on top of her skull and it slid down to rest at her temples. "It's not over for you two—you've got all of that to come. The three of us—time and space. Oh, you just watch us run," she told him fervently.

10

"Let me loose, Rose," the Doctor ordered. "I can fix this."

Rose glanced at River, and then shook her head. "No, Doctor."

"You don't understand yet," River told them. "But you will. I promise, you will."

5

The Doctor was staring at her, Rose knew, and she couldn't meet his eyes. There was a look she didn't want to see. She didn't want him to be disappointed in her, to be angry at her, but she couldn't let him go, not if what River said was true. She remembered her father and the chaos that had come from her attempt to save his life. No, she would not make that mistake again.

1

River plugged two cables together as the countdown ended and a blinding white light filled the room. She yelled something, Rose couldn't tell what, and then she was still.

Donna Noble sat on the stairs of her house—her imaginary house from her imaginary life. The children were gone, but then they were never real in the first place. Oh, but they felt real. It all felt real and she desperately wanted it to stop. The front door slammed open and her husband—but was he really her husband, or did she just make him up—bolted inside.

"Donna!" he called. "What's happening?"

She ran to him and grabbed his arms. He felt solid, comforting—real. "I don't know," she managed
to choke out. "But it isn't real!" Tears slid down her cheeks and dripped off her chin. "Nothing here is real. The whole world—it isn't real!"

He stared at her. "Am I real?" he asked.

She blinked. "Of course you're real!" she replied, with a certainty she did not feel. She lay her hands on his cheeks and stared into his eyes. "I hope you're real—oh god!" The world was turning white. Brilliant light surrounded them, pulled them apart. "I'll find you!" she yelled as he stretched out his hand to her. "I'll find you, I promise I will!" And then he was gone.

In the Library proper Mr. Lux was surrounded by people, all of them dressed in simple, black clothing. It was instantaneous—one minute he was alone, and the next they were there, talking, laughing, living.

"You're back!" he cried and embraced a young man, who patted him awkwardly on the back. "You're all back!" He was almost skipping as he moved through the room. "He did it!"

Rose picked up the Doctor's sonic screwdriver and let him out of the cuffs. He stayed on the floor, staring at River's body. The room smelled of roast pork and it made Rose nauseous. "You could have released me," he said roughly.

She bit her lip. "No." Her voice was soft and full of regret. "I really couldn't." She was quiet for a moment. "You could have let me stay."

The Doctor snorted. "So what, so you could take River's place?"

She looked at him levelly until he met her gaze. "One of these days, Doctor, I'm going to take the hint, and when you send me away I won't come back." The she turned on her heel and walked away.

Donna found the two of them hours later. The Doctor was leaning up against a wall near one of the teleport pads and Rose stood a few feet away, her arms crossed. They were not touching. They weren't even looking at one another. Donna knew she should ask what happened. The two of them were so bloody stubborn sometimes—but right now all she could feel was empty.

"Any luck?" the Doctor asked.

She shook her head. She'd been searching ever since she found herself back in the library. "Wasn't even anyone called 'Lee' in the Library that day. I suppose he could have had a different name out here, but let's be honest." She smiled, although it was far from cheerful. "He wasn't real, was he. I made up the perfect man—gorgeous, adores me, and hardly able to speak a word." She paused. "What does that say about me, then?"

"Everything," Rose replied. Donna and the Doctor turned to stare at her. She blinked. "Sorry, I meant to say nothing, just ended up saying 'everything.'" She didn't look at them. "I'm going back to the TARDIS," she said. "Bit knackered, and I could really use a shower."

"What about the two of you?" Donna asked after she'd gone.
The Doctor was silent for a moment. "I sent her away again," he confessed. "I used the sonic to make the Cannon take her back to the TARDIS." He sighed. "She said—she said that the next time I do that she might not come back. And then there was this misunderstanding with River—Rose thought she was my wife from the future." He laughed. It was not a happy sound. "Of course, so did I for a while."

Donna cocked an eyebrow at him. "Oh, spaceman, you are hopeless."

He ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah, Donna. We've established that."

They were silent for a while, just watching the throng of people move around them. "Take us somewhere pretty," she told him eventually. "Somewhere romantic—somewhere with a spa." She smiled crookedly at him. "I think we could use a rest."

He nodded. "I know just the place. I've been meaning to go there, actually. It's a planet called Midnight, and it's one gigantic diamond."

Donna smiled. "Yeah, that sounds nice."

He held out his hand. "Come on."

They turned to go, and as she stepped through the door a man looked up from the teleport pad—a man with dark curly hair, eyes that twinkled with mischief, and a wide, generous smile. He opened his mouth. "D—d—d—d" but as he tried to speak, he faded from sight.

The Doctor made a slight detour on the route to the TARDIS. They were standing in one of the open hallways that looked out over the rest of the Library. It was a beautiful view. She would like it, he thought, as he pulled the TARDIS blue book—River Song's diary—out of his pocket. Donna stood a few steps behind him as he laid it on the railing next to other books scattered about the smooth surface.

"You friend," Donna began hesitantly, "Professor Song—she knew you and Rose in the future, and she knew me. Maybe—we'll see her again soon."

The Doctor patted the book lightly. "This is her journal. Her past—but my future. We could take a look, see what's coming."

Donna bit her lip, and shook her head. "Spoilers," she reminded him.

He nodded. "Yeah." Then he reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out River's sonic screwdriver, and laid it gently on top of the book. "Come on," he told her and thrust his hands into his pockets as they started up the stairs. "The next chapter is this way."

They were halfway up when he froze. "Why?" he demanded.

Donna blinked at him. "What?" she asked.

"Why would I give her my screwdriver? Why would I do that?" he continued. "I'm a genius, Donna, and future me had years to think about it, all those years to think of a way to save her—and what he did was give her a screwdriver, albeit a sonic one. Why would I do that?" He bolted back down and grabbed the device in question. He ran his fingers over it, testing, probing, and a piece of the outer shell came loose, revealing a bar of green lights that flickered, slowly fading. It was a neural relay. "Oh," he breathed. "Oh!" And then he grinned. "I'm very good!"
"What have you done?" Donna asked.

He held up the screwdriver so she could see the lights. "Saved her." And then he was off.

River Song blinked. She'd been in the control room strapped into the chair. She remembered the chair, and the device, and a searing pain, and then—nothing. She was not in the control room any longer. She was standing on a lawn and there was just a hint of a chill in the air. The sky was overcast and the smell of rain lingered. She was wearing a dress, a long, white dress and a beautiful wrap over it.

"It's okay." A little girl was standing in front of her—the girl from the computer. Next to her was a tall, bald, black man who wore round spectacles and a kindly expression. The girl smiled at her. "You're safe. You'll always be safe here. The Doctor fixed the data core." She gestured to their surroundings. "This is a good place now." River looked around, took in the picket fence and the imposing stone building behind them. "I was worried you might be lonely," the girl continued, "so I brought you some friends."

River turned around and found that her team was looking back at her. Proper Dave and Other Dave, Anita, and Miss Evangelista were all there, all smiling. River felt tears welling up in her eyes as they moved forward to embrace her. "Oh, for heaven's sake," she murmured as they hugged her, each in turn. "They just can't do it, can they? They just can't give in."

Rose Tyler lay curled in a ball beneath the thick, pink duvet that covered her old bed, the bed she'd slept in before she started sharing a room with the Doctor. She knew that he was probably looking for her, but she didn't want to see him at the moment, and she also knew that the TARDIS would understand and keep him away until she was ready. The cold, hard ball of fear that had clawed its way into her chest was melting. The Doctor hadn't told River his name—so who had? She didn't want to examine the question too closely, didn't want to get her hopes up. After all, she was still furious with him. Like Donna, he'd tricked her, sent her away supposedly to keep her safe—but really to keep her from interfering with his plans.

She wasn't the same girl that she had been when she first traveled with him. She was almost two centuries older, with a vast amount of time traveling experience under her belt. She'd been a Torchwood Agent for close to sixty years before she became their prisoner. She had her own transport, which he'd sabotaged, and her own weapon, which she would have used to stop him from essentially killing himself.

She knew that she loved him more than anything else in the universe. She also knew that a marriage of unequal partners could not last. He said that she was more than a companion—but she needed him to believe it. She couldn't keep being more than a companion, in that she shared his bed, but less than his equal when it came time to take action.

"Your pilot," she murmured, "is a bit of an idiot." The TARDIS hummed comfortingly, and Rose knew that the ship agreed with her. She cracked a smile. "But I suppose you know all about that." The lights flickered, and when they came back up Rose discovered a slim, dark blue book sitting on her bedside table, It was tied shut with a golden ribbon that disappeared into the spine. "Thanks," she said, and stroked the wall gently. The TARDIS thrummed her appreciation. It was always nice to feel wanted.

Rose pulled a pen out of her pocket and opened the book. 'Today,' she began to write, 'we met a
woman from our future, a woman named River Song.'

If the Doctor had opened River's journal, which he wouldn't have done even if Donna had asked because he knew all too well the dangers of foreknowledge, he would have found a record of his life. There were newspaper clippings and polaroids, copied documents and journal entries, legends and eye-witness interviews in the book. And if he'd turned to the middle he would have found, beneath a picture of a bottle-blond woman with a blue dress and a knowing smile and a gangly man who'd traded his bowtie and tweed jacket in for a pair of khaki trousers and a white cotton shirt, this revelation from the journal's owner:

*When you run with Rose and the Doctor it feels like it will never end, but however hard you try you can't run forever. Everybody knows that everybody dies and nobody knows it like they do, but I do think that all the skies of all the worlds might just turn dark if they ever, for one moment, accepted it.*

*Everybody knows that everybody dies, but not every day—not today. Some days are special. Some days are so, so blessed. Some days nobody dies at all. Now and then, every once in a very long while, every day in a million days when the wind stands fair and the Doctor and Rose come to call—*

*On those days, everybody lives.*
Nothing you recognize belongs to me! Some dialogue taken from 'Midnight.'

Rose let the Doctor find her a few hours later, after she'd had a shower and a good cry, and she'd documented the instance in her journal. She supposed she'd have to keep one now that River mentioned it. Apparently the Doctor wasn't good with documentation. As he relied on the psychic paper practically everywhere they went, she could appreciate the advice. She was sitting in the kitchen at the breakfast nook with a mug of tea and her copy of Sense and Sensibility when he wandered into the room. She'd been meaning to ask him to take her back to meet Jane Austen. Marianne reminded her of Shareen, although she was no sensible Elinor.

He slid onto the bench across from her. "Hello," he said softly.

"Hello," she replied.

He nodded at her book. "Good choice. The movie wasn't the best, but then I'm not a Hugh Grant fan." She smiled and shrugged, but said nothing. The silence stretched out between them. The Doctor sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Look, Rose—" he began, but she cut him off.

"Don't, Doctor," she told him firmly. The steel was back in her voice and her eyes. "Don't sit there and list all the reasons why you supposedly sent me back. I disagreed with your plan, so you got me out of the way. And you did so by sabotaging my equipment. You didn't even bother to listen to me; you just shut me out again."

"It was the only way," he tried again.

"Fèihuà!*" she snapped. "You were going to die, Doctor. And there are fixed points ahead in your future."

"Who told you that?" he demanded. She looked at him levelly. "River." He sighed. "Rose, we don't know who or what she is in the future. How could you trust her?"

Rose cocked an eyebrow at him. "She told you her name—that made you pretty sure you could trust her. And anyway, I remember what happened the last time we tried to save someone who should have died. Or have you forgotten my father?" She looked away. "I killed you once," she told him, her voice rough. "I'm not going to do it again. And I'm not going to let you do it either. The universe needs you. Regeneration is one thing, but she was right. You would have been gone. And then what am I supposed to do?" The tears were threatening to break through and she took a moment to breathe, to remember who she was. "I'm going to live for a very long time, Doctor," she said eventually. "I want to spend the rest of my life with you, but I can't do that if you're going to insist on treating me like a child."

He was staring at her. He couldn't look away. She was sitting across from him, back straight and head unbowed, and when the tears spilled over her eyelids she made no move to wipe them. She was a contradiction—filled with a sort of fragile strength that stole his breath. She was so much braver than he was in some ways, in many ways really. He told the Dalek Emperor that he was a coward.
every time, and he hadn't been lying. He was terrified of losing her again because she threw herself into whatever situation they found themselves in. They'd had so many close calls even when she first traveled with him. He didn't want to bring her broken body back to the TARDIS. He didn't want to be responsible for her death.

But he didn’t want her to go. He didn't think he'd be able to stand knowing that she was out there in the same universe, alive, but not with him. The thought of anyone else holding her hand, kissing her, loving her made his hearts stop. Or at least, it felt like they did.

"I'm sorry," he said finally.

She sighed. "You say those words so often, Doctor." Her voice was quiet, tired. "Do they mean anything at all?"

"Yes," he said abruptly. "Every single time." He reached across the table and took her hand. She didn't pull away from him, but she didn't encourage him either. "I don't want to lose you," he admitted, his voice raw with pent-up emotion. "There are so many ways you could die, Rose, and you've only got this one life."

"I meant what I said after Pompeii," she reminded him. "You can't keep me safe. I wouldn't want you to keep me safe—to wrap me up in cotton wool and hide me from the universe." She set down her book and reached across the table, cupping her hand around his cheek. "Be brave, Doctor," she murmured.

Something in her eyes gave him pause, something that called to mind a song half-remembered, and River's voice echoed in his head.

How long did you last with the Vortex in you, Doctor? And how long did she? It's no coincidence. But then she gave him a smile and the flicker of gold was forgotten. "I'll try," he promised. "Just—be patient with me, Rose. I'm no good at this relationship stuff."

"I'll hold you to that," she told him.

"I thought we could use a bit of a holiday," he said after a while. "And Donna requested a spa."

She pursed her lips. "And what, you're looking for my suggestions?"

He shrugged. "I had a place in mind, actually. It's called Midnight, and it's made entirely of diamonds."

Rose laughed. "Good thing mum isn't here to hear you say that," she commented. "She'd want to take the whole bloody planet with us."

He grinned. "Well, she could probably figure out a way. I wouldn't put anything past Jackie Tyler."

"Midnight," Rose continued, trying out the name. "Sure, why not. Could do with a bit of a rest after the trips we've had."

The planet of Midnight was gorgeous. The Doctor let Donna and Rose take a look at it from above, shielded, of course, by the TARDIS's impressive force fields. It sparkled in the light of the star it orbited, a jewel in the starry sky. "The star is Xtonic," the Doctor explained. "Super high levels of radiation make it impossible for life to exist on Midnight, and you can't bring any of the gems offworld—they've been poisoned, would kill you in the space of a few minutes."
"But it is beautiful," Rose commented.

Donna sighed. "All I need is a spa, thanks. It'll be nice to put my feet up for a bit."

The Doctor frowned. "You're not going to see any of the sights?" he asked. "They've got a sapphire waterfall, literally, a glacier of sapphire that pushes its way over the Cliffs of Oblivion, shatters into a million pieces, and then falls into a crystal ravine below!"

She shook her head. "That's all well and good, but I'd rather swim in the pool and catch a few rays."

"We've got a pool on the TARDIS," he reminded her.

She cocked an eyebrow at him. "You got a sun on here too? And a pool boy? And a masseuse and a girl who does facials?"

He scratched the back of his neck. "Well, no, not as such, but the point is valid!"

Rose giggled. Watching the two of them argue was frankly hilarious. She knew that they both cared about the other quite a bit, but played it off by going at it like cats and dogs. "Come on, you two. Let's land already and have a bit of fun."

"You can wear your nice shoes, if you'd like," the Doctor told her as he closed the doors and they moved back to the console. "No running for your life this time, I guarantee it."

Rose considered. "Maybe, as long as you promise to land us accurately and not in the middle of a strike or a rebellion."

"Cross my hearts," he told her, and sealed the bargain with a kiss.

Donna was lounging pool-side when a young man dressed in livery brought her a phone on a tray. She had to give it to the Doctor, his psychic paper was dead useful, and when he went to a spa, he went to a spa. She took the phone with a smile for the worker, and put it to her ear.

"I said no," she reminded him sternly.

"Just thought I'd check back and see if you changed your mind," he told her.

She sighed. "Look, spaceman, this is for you and Rose. Have a good time, show her a little romance. Show her that you can take her on a date without getting caught in the middle of an invasion or an assassination plot or whatever."

"They're boarding now," he continued, as if he hadn't heard her.

"No!" she barked.

"Alright, alright." He was sulking. "No need to take out my ears."

"If you'd listened to me the first time," she began.

"Yes, yes." He cut her off. "When we get back Rose wants to try that antigravity restaurant I was telling you about—the one with bibs."

"Have fun," she said sweetly, "and you be careful."
"Nah," he said confidently. "Taking a big space truck with a bunch of strangers across a diamond planet called Midnight, what could go wrong?"

"You say that," she shot back, "and then something will." They rang off and she laid back on the chair. Time for a nap and a bit of her time. She loved traveling with the two of them, she really did, but lately she felt like the universe was playing a big joke on her. She'd been in love twice, and it had ended badly both times. Lance had been lying to her and cheated on her with a giant spider woman, and Lee, the man of her dreams, wasn't real. He felt real, though. That life felt real, and she just couldn't watch the Doctor and Rose be so happy together. She didn't begrudge them anything. She meant what she told Agatha—they deserved to be happy after everything they did for the universe and everything they'd had to overcome, but she couldn't help feeling like she deserved to be happy too.

The Doctor flashed the psychic paper and got them two tickets for the next shuttle to see the Sapphire Waterfall. They slid into the plush seats and Rose looked about. The inside of the vehicle resembled a posh airplane, or maybe a coach bus. There were two columns of seats on either side of a wide aisle that ran the length of the shuttle. The cabin was up front, and housed the pilot and a mechanic. The final crew member was a hostess. They were the first passengers onboard, and the Doctor watched the others file on with great interest.

"So," Rose asked him. "How long 'till we get there?"

"Four hours," he replied, "and then four back."

She smiled. "Well, that's a change, having to wait for an adventure. Are you sure you'll be able to last four hours, Doctor?"

"Oi!" he protested in mock-offense. "Cheeky thing you are, Miss Tyler." She smiled at him, her tongue caught between her teeth, and something released in his chest. She'd been cheerful, but not herself. She was watching him, he presumed, to see if he was serious about what he'd said on the TARDIS. His earlier incarnations would probably have teased him relentlessly about the degree to which he was attuned to her, but he didn't care. He loved her, and when she wasn't herself he wasn't himself.

The hostess arrived before she could come up with a witty rejoinder, and began handing them things. "That's the headphones for channel 1 through 36, modem link for 3D vidgames, complimentary earplugs, complimentary slippers, complimentary juice pack, and complimentary peanuts." She handed the same to Rose, who took the items with a smile and a polite 'thanks.' "I must warn you that some products contain nuts," she recited as she was about to leave.

"That would be the peanuts," the Doctor stated, a bit confused. Wasn't it obvious?

She simpered at them. "Enjoy your trip."

"I can't wait!" he said, gleeful. "Allons-y!"

The hostess turned back towards them. "Excuse me?"

Rose elbowed him, and he looked properly chastened. "It means 'let's go' in French."

"Fascinating," the hostess replied sarcastically and then moved on to the next passenger.

There weren't many people going to see the Sapphire Waterfall—the shuttle was barely half-full. An
old man and a young black woman sat behind Rose and the Doctor. On the other side of the aisle partway down a middle-aged white couple were debating the pros and cons of saving the juice box while their teenage son sat across from them—as far away as he could possibly get. An older woman—mid forties, early fifties maybe, sat across from Rose and the Doctor. She glanced at them, but appeared mostly occupied with a paperback book.

"They call it the 'Sapphire Waterfall,' the old man behind them was telling the young black girl, "but it's no such thing. Sapphire is an aluminum oxide, but the glacier is just compound silica with iron pigmentation."

The Doctor, sensing a potentially interesting conversation, turned around to face them. The old man seemed to think the same, and leaned forward. "Hobbes," he said and held out his hand. "Professor Winfold Hobbes."

The Doctor took his hand with a grin. "I'm the Doctor, hello, and this is Rose." She smiled at him and waved.

"It's my fourteenth time," the professor confided.

"Oh," the Doctor replied. "It's our first." He smiled at Rose, who nodded.

"And I'm Dee Dee," the young black woman said. "Dee Dee Blasco."

"Nice to meet you both," Rose replied.

The professor frowned at Dee Dee. "Don't bother the man," he admonished her. "Where's my waterbottle?" She dug around in her oversized purse until she procured the treasured object and passed it over. The professor, Rose noted, was a bit overbearing.

They settled back in their seats, and Rose flashed a smile at the woman across from them. She nodded, but did not return the smile, and redirected her attention to the book in front of her.

"Don't be silly," the wife of the middle aged couple was saying to their son. "Come and sit with us." She held up one of the plastic packages. "Look, we get slippers!" The boy looked mortified.

"Oh, we embarrass him," the husband noted, "but he doesn't mind us paying!"

"Leave him alone," his wife scolded.

When everyone was settled and all of the various packaged goods had been distributed, the hostess made her way to the front of the shuttle. "Ladies and gentlemen and variations thereupon, welcome onboard the Crusader 50. If you could please fasten your seatbelts we'll be leaving any moment." The doors hissed as they slid closed and thick plating covered the windows. "I'm afraid the view is shielded," the hostess informed them with a plastered-on smile, "until we reach the waterfall palace. Also, a reminder: Midnight has no air, so please stay away from the exterior door seals." She continued with the obligatory safety speech before bringing in the captain, who gave them a rundown of their route. They were making a slight detour, as the equivalent of an avalanche had cut off their original route.

The hostess went to turn on the entertainment system, which apparently included a music channel that was played on individual screens that dropped from the ceiling, cartoons from the 1950's, and some sort of swirling mass of lights that was supposed to be an artistic installation. Rose covered her ears. It was sensory overload.
The Doctor pulled the sonic screwdriver out of his pocket, and activated it with an air of extreme nonchalance. All of the multitudinous screens flickered and then went black. Rose sighed with relief and let her hands fall. "Thanks," she murmured. "That was awful—worse than when Tony threw a tantrum."

"Well, that's a mercy," the professor declared.

"I do apologize," the hostess told them as she messed with the remote, trying to bring the systems back up. "Ladies and gentlemen and variations thereupon, we seem to have had a failure of the entertainment system."

"Oh," the Doctor replied, looking not at all sorry.

"But what do we do?" the middle-aged woman asked.

"We've got four hours of this?" her husband agreed. "Four hours of just—sitting here?"

Rose kneeled in her seat and poked her head over the top. "I guess we'll have to talk to each other," she said with a coy smile.

"Exactly!" the Doctor proclaimed with a grin.

For all of Rose's jokes about him being rude and not ginger, and for all that he could, in fact, be quite rude, when the Doctor wanted to be charming, he was very charming. He had a charisma that drew people to him. He seemed to listen with such enthusiastic energy that almost anyone found him or herself liking the chattering young man in the pinstriped suit. It helped that his companion was a beautiful young woman who seemed to share his enthusiastic interest in their lives.

Ninety-Eight clicks after his sabotage of the so-called 'entertainment systems,' the Doctor found himself talking to the middle-aged couple: a man named Biff and his wife Val. Their son's name was Jethro, and he seemed content to let them waffle on whilst he sat in the corner. Val and Biff were relating an apparently frequently-told anecdote involving a misunderstanding, an abstract swimming pool, and a nose plug.

"So I went up the lifeguard," Biff was saying. "He was a Shamboni, you know, big foreheads." The Doctor nodded, grinning. Val tittered. "And I said 'where's the pool?' And he said—'the pool's abstract!'" Across the aisle Dee Dee and the professor laughed.

"It wasn't a real pool," Val went on, talking through her laughter.

"It was a concept," Biff agreed.

"An' you were wearing a nose plug?" Rose asked, eyes dancing.

Biff nodded, holding his nose. "I was all—'where's the pool?'" he asked in a congested voice. The passengers, barring Jethro who looked disgusted and rather embarrassed, dissolved into laughter.

One hundred and fifty clicks later the Doctor was talking to Dee Dee about her position with the professor while Rose sat next to Jethro. "I'm only a second year student," the young woman told him, "but I wrote a paper on the Lost Moon of Poosh. The professor liked it and took me on as his research assistant." She sighed. "Of course, he's had me mostly lifting and carrying, but it's good
"Did they ever find it?" the Doctor inquired. She looked at him blankly. "The Lost Moon of Poosh," he clarified.

"Oh," she laughed. "Not yet, no."

He grinned. "Maybe that'll be your big discovery."

Two hundred and nine clicks later they were eating dinner. The Doctor sat on the outside and struck up a conversation with the woman across from them. Rose was talking to Donna on her superphone. Apparently the food at the spa was delicious. Rose glanced down at her in-flight meal and pursed her lips. She was pretty sure it was meat—of some kind.

"I'm traveling with Rose, of course," the Doctor told the woman—Sky. "And then there's our friend Donna. She stayed back at the resort. And you?"

"Ah," Sky replied as she pushed a chunk of something brown around with her spoon. "It's just me."

The Doctor nodded knowingly. "I've done a bit of that. To tell you the truth, I miss it sometimes. Rose and Donna have this overwhelming fondness for shoes." He said the word like it left a dirty taste in his mouth. "Can't see the point of having more than two, myself. When you're on your own you can go anywhere you want, do anything. No mandatory shopping trips or visits to their mums."

Sky sighed. "I'm still getting used to it. I found myself single rather recently—not by choice."

The corners of his mouth tugged down in a sympathetic frown. "What happened?" he asked gently.

"Oh, the usual." She tried to make light of the situation, but her smile was forced. "She needed her space. A different galaxy, in fact. I reckon that's enough space, don't you?"

He nodded knowingly. "I'd say so. Rose ended up in a different universe once—not exactly by choice either."

She picked at the food in front of her. "What do you think this is, chicken, or beef?"

He held up a chunk impaled on his spork. "Both, I think."

Two hundred and fifty-one clicks later the professor was giving a presentation on the planet they were visiting as the hostess made more coffee in the tiny kitchen at the back. Jethro had finally given up his sulking and leaned against the top of the chair in front of him, intrigued. Rose and the Doctor had reunited and were perched on the edges of their seats, hands entwined. "It's almost as good as listening to you ramble," she murmured.

"Thinking of leaving me for a younger man?" he asked, eyes twinkling.

She bumped his shoulder with her own. "Nah," she told him. "Experience counts for something. Besides, I've always had a thing for older men."

"This is Midnight," the professor began, motioning to the image that covered the projector screen that was previously occupied by cartoons from the 1950's. Rose thought that it was being put to much better use. "It is constantly bombarded by the sun—Xtonic rays, raw Galvanic radiation." He
glanced to his assistant, who was working the slide show machine. "Next slide please, Dee Dee. It's my pet project," he told them. "I'm the first person to research this, because you see, the history is fascinating—because there is no history. There's no life in this entire system—couldn't be. Before the leisure palace company moved in no one had come here in all eternity—no living thing." His words sent shivers up Rose's spine. It was so lonely, the idea of an eternity in isolation. Of course, there was nothing to be lonely, as there was no life on the planet.

"But how do you know?" Jethro asked. "I mean, if you can't go outside?"

His mother sighed. "Oh, his imagination, here we go."

Rose frowned. She'd had enough people dismiss her ideas, and her experiences as fantasies to prick when someone did the same to another. "I think it's a great question," she spoke up. "You can't prove a negative."

"He's got a point," the Doctor agreed.

"Exactly!" the professor acknowledged. "We look upon this world through glass, safe inside our metal box. Even the leisure palace was lowered down from orbit, and here we are now, crossing Midnight but never touching it."

An eerie sort of chill spread through the room at his words, and then the shuttle shook and ground to a halt.

________________________________________________________________________

Something was wrong. Rose could tell when the Doctor returned from the cabin. He'd bullied his way in with the psychic paper, and although he assured everyone that it was fine, they were only stabilizing the engines, there was something off about his expression. Her fears were confirmed when Dee Dee noted that the engines were micropetrol, and thus did not, in fact, stabilize.

The situation was starting to get out of hand. Rose was trying her hardest to reassure the people around her. Panic never helped anyone, and frequently it made the situation worse.

"What happened?" she murmured.

"Not sure," he whispered back. "Engine feeds are fine. One of them—Claude—thought he saw something on the planet's surface, something moving towards us."

"That's impossible, isn't it?" she asked.

He pursed his lips. "So was you coming back from Pete's world, but it still happened." He raised his voice so the others could hear. "A rescue ship is on its way and it will be here in an hour. We just need to sit tight until then."

"How much air have we got?" the professor demanded.

Val's eyes widened. "Oh god, are we going to suffocate?" she asked, her voice strained.

The conversation degenerated from there, until the Doctor finally shouted, "Quiet!" The others fell silent and stared at him. "Thank you," he continued at a normal volume. "Now, we're all going to listen to my friend Dee Dee."

The girl stood. "My dad was a mechanic, and I know a little bit about machines," she told them. "The air's on a circular filter—we could be breathing for ten years with that."
"There," Rose said. "See? We're fine. We just have to wait for them to pick us up."

Something banged against the wall of the shuttle twice.

*bullshit
Whispers in the Dark

Chapter Notes

Nothing you recognize belongs to me. Some dialogue taken from 'Midnight.'

The belief in a supernatural source of evil is not necessary: men alone are quite capable of every wickedness.

Joseph Conrad

Rose jumped. Jethro flinched away from the wall and everyone turned to stare at the side of the shuttle from whence the sound came.

"What is that?" Sky demanded. "Is someone out there?" The Doctor's hold on Rose's hand tightened. She didn't like the atmosphere around them. The others had already proven to be excitable and easily spooked. She'd seen what a mob could do in her years in Pete's World. She had no desire to relive the experience. Human beings could be fantastic, but in the grip of panic, they could also be horrific.

"Don't be ridiculous," the professor replied.

"Like I said," Dee Dee continued, "it could be rocks."

"We're out in the open," the hostess disagreed. "Nothing could fall against the sides."

The banging repeated. "Knock knock," the Doctor murmured. The others pulled away, moved closer to the center aisle. White showed around the iris of Val's eyes as she clutched her husband's hand.

Jethro, at least, seemed to be more amused by the situation than afraid. "Who's there?" he asked mockingly. Rose didn't care if he took what was happening seriously or not, as long as he remained calm.

Sky, on the other hand, was anything but calm. "Well?" she asked belligerently, her voice loud in the silence that had fallen over the shuttle. "Anyone?"

Two more bangs cut through the air, and she flinched violently. "What the hell is making that noise?" she cried.

"I'm sorry," the professor interrupted her. "But the light out there is Xtonic! That means it would destroy any living thing in a split second." He snapped his fingers. "Quicker than that. So you see, there can't be anything out there."

The Doctor stood and pulled Rose with him into the aisle. He stared at the wall of the shuttle silently, studying it. She'd seen that look before, and it sent shivers up her spine. He was assessing the structural integrity of the shuttle. He was deciding whether or not it was likely that something could get inside.

The banging came again, this time from further down. It was working its way around the vehicle,
Rose realized.

"Then what the hell is that?" Val demanded. There was an edge of hysteria to her voice but Biff wrapped an arm around her and that seemed to calm her just a bit. Rose had a feeling that she and Sky would be the ones to watch. The Doctor released her hand and pulled his stethoscope out of his pocket.

"Sir," the hostess insisted, "you really should get back to your seat!" Rose followed him and ignored the other woman. He placed the metal cup against the wall and she couldn't help but remember the last time he used it—to listen to his daughter's dual heartbeat.

"Hello?" he asked softly. Two bangs answered him from further down, and then a split second later another pair from across the shuttle. The passengers pulled back, huddled in the middle. Even Jethro looked unsettled.

"It's moving," he noted.

The handle of the door at the back of the shuttle rattled.

"It's trying the door!" Val cried, her arm outstretched. The Doctor moved closer and Rose followed him, her hand resting casually close to the gun concealed beneath her jacket. She had a feeling she'd be needing it, if not for whatever was outside, than for the people inside.

"There is no it!" the professor insisted. "There's nothing out there—can't be!"

Rose was getting extremely tired of his denials. Was this how the Doctor had felt when Charles Dickens refused to believe that the dead were walking? She wanted to take him by the shoulders and shake some sense into him.

The door handle rattled again, louder this time—and again. There was silence for a long moment, and then whatever it was pounded twice on the roof. The Doctor was tense, fairly vibrating with energy. He was on mauve alert.

Whatever it was found the other door—the one they'd entered through on the side, and slammed against it. Val and Biff were standing closest, and jumped back. Biff had remained relatively calm, but Val's nervousness was starting to wear on him. "That's the entrance!" she said, voice high and afraid. "Can it get in?"

Dee Dee's answer was immediate and certain. "No. That's door's on 200 weight of hydraulics."

"Stop it!" the professor hissed. "Don't encourage them."

"Well what do you think it is?" she snapped back.

Biff approached the door. Val tried to grab his hand and pull him back, but he brushed her off. He laid a hand against the cool metal. "It's cast iron," he told them, and then he knocked three times.

His gesture was mirrored back at him with three loud knocks. That was it then. There had to be something out there. It changed the pattern only after it received new input. Rose's hand was tucked into her pocket inches from her gun. It would take her less than a second to draw and fire. She hoped, she really hoped, that it wouldn't come to violence, but if it did, she was prepared.

"Three times," Sky said. "It did it three times, did you hear it? Three times!"

"It answered," Jethro agreed.
The Doctor stepped in front of the door and held his hands out in a comforting gesture. "All right, all right," he told them. "Calm down. Everyone, just calm down."

"But it answered!" Val protested.

"Don't tell me it's not alive!" Sky agreed, "when it answered! Three times, you all heard it!"

Three loud knocks reverberated through the shuttle. The hostess was trying, in vain, to get everyone back into their seats, but Sky would have none of it. "Don't just stand there telling us the rules!" she shouted. "You're the hostess—you're supposed to do something!"

Back at the door the Doctor knocked four times. A breath later four knocks answered.

Sky pulled back, away from the others. Her hands moved restlessly over her face to clutch at her arms. She was shaking. "What the hell is making that noise? She said she would get me—oh, it's coming for me, she's coming for me!" She was almost sobbing, yelling something about someone finding her. "Stop it, make it stop! Don't just stand there looking at me!"

Rose reached out. "Sky—" but the woman flinched away from her.

"No!" she cried. "No, she's going to find me, she's going to get me! It's his fault!" She pointed at the professor. "He started it, with his stories!"

"Calm down!" Dee Dee yelled.

"You're just making it worse," the Doctor told her. His voice was level and soothing as he stepped closer to the terrified woman. "It's all right, Sky." But it didn't help. She continued to yell and the babble of voices only got louder as people began to yell back.

The pounding became continuous, and as Sky backed away from them it seemed to follow her. "It's coming for me," she murmured, her eyes glazed and very very wide. "Oh, it's coming for me!"

"Get away from there!" the Doctor yelled and started forward, but before he could reach her the shuttle rocked and all the lights went out. It was like being in an earthquake, Rose thought as she clung desperately to one of the seats. The shuttle was tossing about as if it weighed nothing and its passengers were little more than leaves on a wind. Sparks rained down from the ceiling, and it felt like the tremors went on for an eternity.

When it finally settled Rose was sprawled across two seats. She was fairly certain she'd have some spectacular bruises from the armrests, but otherwise seemed unharmed. The Doctor was with her immediately. Low light hardly bothered him at all, and he ran his hands over her arms and then down her sides, checking for injury. "All right?" he asked quietly. She nodded. "Everyone else?" he called. "Biff, Val, Jethro?"


"Professor, Dee Dee?" he asked.

"We're all right," she replied.

He turned around. "What about the hostess?" A beam of light hit him full in the face and he winced, covering his eyes.

"I'm fine, ta very much," she told him. "And I've got torches."
"Earthquake," the professor suggested after the torches were distributed.

"That's impossible," Dee Dee disagreed. "The ground is fixed; it's solid!"

Jethro had moved to the front of the shuttle despite his mother's complaints. "What about her?" he asked, and aimed his flashlight at Sky, who said clutching her head, surrounded by broken seats. Something had ripped their tops off.

Rose started forward. "Sky?" she asked softly. "Mrs. Silvestry? It's all right; it's over; we're still alive." She received no response. She touched the woman's shoulder gently. "Are you all right?" she asked. "Are you hurt? Can you talk to me, Sky?" Still no response, and the woman remained tightly coiled, her hands against her head, shielding her face from view.

The hostess tried to contact the captain and the mechanic in the cabin, but the radio was silent. "It must be malfunctioning," she told them, and pressed the button to open the door between the shuttle proper and the cabin room. Blinding light streamed into the room. The cabin was gone. An alarm blared and the hostess pressed the button again. Xtonic radiation, Rose remembered as the door slid shut, strong enough to reduce a human being to dust.

"What was that?" Val demanded.

"The Driver?" Biff wanted to know. "Have we lost the driver?"

"The cabin's gone," the hostess said, her voice flat from shock. "It's gone."

"It can't be gone," the professor scoffed, although he sounded far from certain. "How can it be gone?"

"You saw it!" Dee Dee snapped back. "It's gone!"

"There was nothing there," the hostess continued, "like it was ripped away."

"What are you doing?" Biff demanded. The Doctor was kneeling next to a control panel on the wall.

"Little bit of light," he replied. "That's it," he said as the panel came away under the influence of his sonic screwdriver. "Molto Bene."

"Do you know what you're doing?" Val asked.

"The cabin's gone!" Biff declared, as if they hadn't seen it when he did. "You'd better leave that wall alone!"

"Any rupture would automatically seal itself," the Doctor told them reassuringly. "It's safe." He paused as the panel came away in his hands. The wires were cut jaggedly, as if something had ripped through them. "But something sliced it off." He drew his lips into a thin, tight line. "You're right. The cabin's gone."

"But if it's gone it loses integrity!" the hostess exclaimed.

The Doctor let the panel fall to the ground as he stood. "I'm sorry," he told her, his voice quiet and sad. "They've been turned to dust—the driver and the mechanic."

"But we're in here," Rose jumped in. "And we're safe. We've got enough air and there's a rescue ship coming. It'll be here in about forty minutes." She smiled at them. "There's no reason to panic."
The Doctor stood beside her, one hand on the small of her back. She could feel the tension in him, like violin string drawn tight. "We are gonna get out of here," he agreed. "I promise. We are still alive, and they are going to find us."

"Doctor," Jethro said, "look at her." His light was fixed on Sky, who continued to huddle in the front of the shuttle. There was something—off about her. She'd been stiff when Rose touched her, almost like a corpse when rigor mortis set in.

"Right," the Doctor acknowledged. "Sorry. Anyone got a medical kit?"

"Why won't she turn around?" Jethro wanted to know. There was a bit of a waver in his voice, and Rose wondered if he'd picked up on the fear circling the cabin. It was almost overwhelming, and when she looked at Sky—it was the Library all over again. There was something wrong.

"Sky?" he called as he stepped towards her. Rose fought the urge to pull him back from the motionless woman. The woman was still in a way that made Rose's blood run cold, in a way that was not human. "Can you hear me, Sky? Can you move?" The woman did not respond to him, did not even acknowledge his presence. "Just look at me," he requested.

"That noise from outside," Jethro continued. "It's stopped."

"Thank God for that!" Val cried shrilly.

"But what if it's not outside anymore?" he asked, eyes wide. "What if it's inside?"

"What?" his mother demanded. "Where?"

He nodded at Sky and the Doctor. "It was heading for her."

Rose shone her light at the wall. There was a dent, but the metal remained unbroken. "Look," she commanded them. "The wall is intact. Let's not go jumping to conclusions just yet."

"It's all right Sky," the Doctor told the woman. "I just want you to turn around. Can you do that for me?" His voice was calm, soothing, nonthreatening. Slowly one hand eased down, and the other, and then she turned her head. Her eyes were wide, but unafraid, and they looked out at the others with a fierce intensity. Her mouth was flat, completely flat, and it lent her face a sort of mocking contempt. She glanced quickly at each of them, studying them in a second and then moving on. Her movements were jerky—like a caged animal. Any movement drew her attention back.

The Doctor leaned in and she snapped her head back to stare at him. He tilted his head, and she mirrored his action. It was eerie, like watching some kind of bizarre puppet show. His eyes were fixed on her as he searched her face for any sign of the woman he'd spoken with earlier. "Sky?" he asked warily.

Her lips moved, and the word came out haltingly. "Sky?" she repeated.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Are you all right?" she mimicked.

He raised an eyebrow. "Are you hurt?"

"Are you hurt?" was her response. She continued to mimic him as he told her that she didn't have to talk, that he was trying to help, that he was the Doctor. However, it wasn't just him. When the professor broke into the conversation she repeated him, and Val, and Biff. When Rose told them all
to be quite, Sky mimicked her, tone and intonation perfect.

The Doctor pulled her attention back to him as he leaned in closer. His eyebrows were almost to his hairline. "Why are you repeating?" he asked. The only answer he got was his words given back in precisely the same delivery. "What is that," he continued, squinting at her. "Learning? Copying? Absorbing?" He tried to shake her off, to make her falter or slip up, but even when he recited the square root of pi to the 30th digit she continued to repeat flawlessly—and she was speeding up. Her repetition had been slow when she first spoke, but the more she said, the faster she went.

"That's impossible," the professor breathed. "She couldn't repeat all that!"

"Tell her to stop!" Val snapped. "She's driving me mad!" She gasped out a sound that was a cross between a sob and an angry cry. "Just make her stop!"

"It's got to be a trick," the hostess murmured.

"Stop it!" Val continued. "Stop her staring at me!" They continued to shout orders and murmur denials and Sky repeated every one. The Doctor stood and stretched out his arms, trying to get them to calm down, but they took no notice.

Rose put her fingers to her lips and whistled shrilly. The noise panicked chatter died as they focused on her, and not the thing that used to be Sky. "That's enough of that, then," she said sternly, doing her best to ignore the mocking voice that echoed her words. "The rescue will be here soon, and this panic isn't helping anything." The lights flickered on with a low buzz, and they sighed in relief.

"That's better," Biff admitted grudgingly.

"That poor woman," the professor began, "is obviously in a state of self-induced hysteria, and we should leave her alone."

Sky, or the thing that used to be Sky, had fallen silent when the lights came on, but halfway through the professor's words she began to speak again, but this time she wasn't repeating. She was talking with him. The words left her mouth at precisely the same time as they left his, like he was speaking in stereo.

Jethro had noticed. "Doctor?" he asked.

"I know," he answered.

"Doctor," the professor and Sky said, "now step back. I think you should—" the older man trailed off, as he noticed what the others already had. "What's she doing?" he asked. "How can she do that?" The flat expression was gone from her face. One corner of her lips twisted upwards in the barest of smiles, although there was no warmth in it.

"She's talking with you," Val told him, "and with me!" She grabbed her husband's hand. "Biff, what's she doing?"

"She's repeating," Jethro told them. "At exactly the same time."

"But that's impossible!" Dee Dee declared.

"There's not even a delay," the professor observed.

Rose kept her eyes on the Doctor, who was looking hard at the thing that used to be Sky. "I think you all should be very, very quiet," he said deliberately. "Have you got that?"
"How's she doing it?" Val demanded.

"Mrs. Cane," Rose replied, "please be quiet!"

Val was having none of it. The more that Sky repeated, the angrier she became. "How can she do that!" she screeched. "She's got my voice, my words!" Tried to placate her, put a comforting and restraining hand on her arm. Rose had been right—she was one to watch. No head in a crisis, that one.

"Sweetheart, hush," he murmured. "Hush now." And then his eyes went wide. "She's doing it to me!"

"Stop it, all of you!" the Doctor snapped. "Stop it, please!" He tried again, tried to get her to make a mistake, but she followed along with whatever he said flawlessly. He rose, and stepped back. "First she repeats," he mused, "and then she catches up. What's the next stage?"

"That's not her, is it," Jethro stated. "That's not Mrs. Silvestry anymore."

"I don't think so," the Doctor agreed. "No."

"Doctor?" Rose asked, trying to bring him back down to Earth—or Midnight, rather. There was a kind of manic excitement edged with danger that seemed to overtake him in these sort of situations. She knew that he was fascinated by the thing that had been Sky. Here was a brand-new life form, something that the universe had previously believed impossible. The others, she knew, wouldn't see it the same way, wouldn't see an opportunity. They would see a threat.

"I think," he continued slowly, eyes still fixed on the thing that had been Sky, "that the more we talk, the more she learns. Now, I'm all for education, but in this case—maybe not." His expression shifted. A bit of the wonder drained out and was replaced with worry. "Let's just move back, shall we? Everyone get back, as far as you can." They went haltingly. Val seemed almost paralyzed with fear, and she was close to tears. Jethro appeared unnerved, but still levelheaded. Biff's temperament reflected his wife's. The Professor and Dee Dee both looked unsettled, but otherwise they were dealing with the strangeness of the situation rather well. At least, on the surface.

"All we need is forty minutes," the Doctor told them. "Forty minutes until the transport arrives. And she's not exactly strong. Look at her, all she's got is our voices."

"I can't look at her," Val snapped. "It's those eyes."

Rose knew what she meant. They were wide and feral—not a human's eyes, not anymore. They were the eyes of a wild thing.

"She's not a goblin or a monster," the professor asserted. "She's just a very sick woman."

"Maybe that's why that thing went for her," Jethro suggested.

The professor rolled his eyes. "There is no it."

"The knocking went all the way around the bus until it found her," Jethro continued. "She was the most scared—maybe that's what it needed. That's how it got in."

"For the last time!" the old man declared. "Nothing can live on the surface of Midnight!"

The Doctor had had enough. "Professor," he said sharply, "I'm glad that you've got an absolute definition of life in the universe, but perhaps the universe has got ideas of its own, hmm? Now, trust
"me," he continued, "I've got previous experience—but I think there might be some kind of consciousness inside Mrs. Silvestry, but Sky might still be in there and it's our job to help her."

"You can help her then," Biff said with a sneer. "I'm not going hear her."

"No," the Doctor disagreed. "I've got to stay back, because if she's copying us than maybe the final stage is becoming us, and I don't want her becoming me or things could get a lot worse."

"Oh, like you're so special," Val sniffed.

Rose bristled. He was probably their best chance of surviving, and she was just dismissing him out of hand. "As it happens," she told the woman with an edge to her voice, "yes, he is."

"So that's decided," the Doctor continued. "We stay back and we wait, and when the rescue ship arrives we can get her to hospital."

The hostess spoke up for the first time in a very long while. "We should throw her out."

Rose stared at her. The Doctor raised an eyebrow. Biff turned his head. "I beg your pardon?" the professor asked, clearly shocked.

Val didn't seem bothered by the suggestion. In fact, she seemed to welcome it. "Can we do that?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" the Doctor snapped.

"That thing," the hostess spat, "whatever it is, killed the driver and the mechanic and I don't think she's finished yet!"

"She can't even move," Rose pointed out. She did not like the direction the conversation had taken. They were hovering on the precipice of something terrible and she could feel the balance shifting. All it took was a shove in the right place and the situation would avalanche out of control.

"Look at her!" the hostess ordered. "Look at her eyes! She killed Joe, and she killed Claude, and we're next!"

"She's still doing it," Biff pointed out, "still repeating! Stop it!" he yelled. "Just stop!" He paced at the back. "We can't throw her out, though, can't even open the doors."

"No one," the Doctor said, quiet and calm and deadly serious, "is getting thrown out."

"Yes we can," Dee Dee said a moment later. "There's an air pressure seal. It takes the pressure wall six seconds to deteriorate—that's long enough to throw someone out."

"Would it kill her, outside?" Val asked.

"I don't know," Dee Dee replied. "But she's got a body now, and it would certainly kill the physical form."

The Doctor was staring at them. "No one is getting killed!" he declared.

They ignored him. "I wouldn't risk the cabin door twice," the hostess advised, "but we've got that one." She pointed to the door on the side and the one behind them. "And that one. All we need to do is grab hold of her and throw her out!"

He'd heard enough. The Doctor threw up his hands. "Listen, all of you," he commanded. "For all we know that's a brand-new life-form over there! And if it's come inside to discover us, than what's it
found? This little bunch of humans, what do you amount to? Murder? 'Cause this is where you
decide, this is where you decide who you are. Could you actually murder her? Any of you? Really?"
He glanced around at the faces staring back at him. "Or are you better than that?"

There was silence for a moment. Then the hostess spoke. "I'd do it," she said.

"So would I," Biff agreed.

"And me," Val put in.

Dee Dee lifted her head. "I think we should."

"What?" the Doctor asked, stunned.

"I want her out!" Dee Dee replied. "I'm sorry, but you said it yourself, Doctor. She's growing in
strength!"

He shook his head. "That's not what I said."

"I'm sorry," she said, tears in her voice. "But I want to go home, I want to be safe."

"You'll be safe in a moment," he assured her, "when the rescue truck gets here."

"And what then?" the hostess demanded. "If it takes that thing back to the leisure palace, if it reaches
civilization, what if it spreads?"

"That won't happen," he said confidently, "because when we get back to the base Rose and I will
contain it."

"You haven't done much so far," Val remarked disdainfully.

"She's dangerous," the hostess insisted, "and it's my job to see that this vessel is safe."

The professor broke into the conversation. "Now hang out, I think we're all going a little bit too far."
The Doctor clapped a hand on his arm in relief. "Thank you."

"Two people are dead!" the hostess screeched.

"Don't make it a third!" the Doctor snapped back angrily. There was silence.

"Jethro?" Rose asked. "What do you say?"

He shook his head. "I'm not killing anyone."

"Good man," the Doctor replied.

"He's just a boy," Val scoffed.

"What, so I don't get a vote?" he demanded.

The Doctor clutched at his hair. "There is no vote!" he yelled. "It's not happening—ever!" He let his
hand fall and straightened his shoulders. "If you try to throw her out that door you'll have to go
through me." His voice was low and intense, a tone he usually saved for whatever dictator they were
overthrowing that week. The others regarded him for a moment.

The hostess spoke first. "Okay."
"Fine by me," Bill snarled.

"You said 'human,'" Val said slowly, "like you're something else."

"That's because he is," Rose snapped. "And he's the cleverest one in the room, so maybe you should listen to him!"

"I'm not listening to no Alien," Biff growled. "You're on her side!"

"I am on no one's side!" the Doctor responded heatedly. "But I won't stand by and let you murder someone!"

"Who put you in charge anyway?" Val asked viciously.

The professor frowned. "You're a doctor of what, exactly?"

"What kind of alien?" Jethro wanted to know. "Looks human enough to me."

"All right!" Rose bellowed, and a momentary silence fell. She whipped out the psychic paper and held it in front of her at shoulder level. "I am agent Rose Tyler of the Royal Torchwood Institute, and this is my partner Doctor John Tyler, extraterrestrial expert." Her voice was crisp and stern, a tone she used often in the field for disciplining out-of-line agents and cowing intransigent locals into obedience. They stared at her. "Now," she continued. "I really didn't want to have to do this, because this was supposed to be a holiday for us, but you've left me no choice. We are experts at handling these sort of situations, and the Doctor knows what he's talking about. Right now, you need to calm down and do as he says. All right?"

They nodded silently. She gestured for the Doctor to continue. "Right," he said after a while. "We're going to stay back here, away from Mrs. Silvestry, and we're going to be quiet and calm and wait for the rescue transport to arrive."

Of course, things never went to plan, not when the Doctor was around. She'd managed to forge a tentative peace with the psychic paper, but it didn't last long. The final straw came when the thing that had been Sky stopped repeating.

Only she didn't. She ignored almost everyone: Val and Biff, Jethro and Dee Dee, the Professor and the hostess, even Rose, but when the Doctor spoke—she spoke with him. That was it, was all it took to overwhelm the tenuous authority their supposed position as members of Torchwood had gained for them.

"Look!" Val exclaimed. "I'm talking and she's not!"

"What about me?" Biff asked, and then grinned when he heard only his voice. It was almost strange, hearing someone talk by themselves.

"Doctor?" Rose asked, but he was looking beyond her, gazing at the thing that had been Sky. He took a step towards her. She watched him with those eyes—those eyes that said that he was something small and scampering, and she was about to pounce. No one looked at the Doctor like that. He was the one who directed that look at others, usually others who had done something horrible, like genocide.

"Sky?" he asked, moving closer. She continued to speak with him. "What are you doing?"
"She's still doing him," Val noted with just a hint of malicious satisfaction in her voice.

"Doctor, stop." Rose said, with just a hint of desperation.

He ignored her. All of his attention was focused on the thing in front of him. "Why me?" he continued. "Why are you doing this?"

"She won't leave him alone, you see?" Val was speaking again, spreading her poison. "She's with 'im, with both of them! I said it, didn't I?" It would have been easier if Rose could blame her words on possession, but there was nothing wrong with Val Chase. She was human, and she was frightened, and she wanted a scapegoat. Rose's hand closed around the slim metal handle of her gun. She wasn't getting the Doctor.

"They're together," Biff agreed, "all three of them."

"How do you explain it, Doctor?" the professor pressed. "You're so clever, surely you have an explanation."

"I don't know," he growled. "I am clever, Professor Hobbes, but what I don't know makes up probably around 90 percent of the universe." He turned back to the thing that had been Sky Silvestry. "Stop it!" he barked. She spoke with him. "I said stop it, Sky! Just stop it!"

Rose very deliberately placed herself between the passengers and the Doctor and the thing that had been Sky. She moved casually, as if she was simply tired of leaning up against the seat, as she had been for the past twenty minutes. There was no need to inflame them any more—they were doing a fine job of working themselves into a frenzy without her help. The Doctor, meanwhile, knelt in front of the thing.

"Mrs. Silvestry," he said quietly. "I'm trying to understand. You've captured my speech. What for?"

The only response he received was his words, echoed precisely, as he said them. "What do you need?" he went on. Realization dawned on him, lit his eyes up with a manic fire. "You need my voice in particular—the cleverest voice in the room." Someone snorted in disbelief, and Rose glared at them. "But why? Because I'm the only one that can help?" A smile curved his lips, but there was no warmth to it. "Oh, I'd love that to be true, but your eyes, they're saying something else. Listen to me; whatever you want, if it's life or form or consciousness or voice, you don't have to steal it."

Rose reached over and touched his shoulder. "I think you should stop, Doctor." The hair on the back of her neck was standing up. Something was wrong. "You said we shouldn't talk to her, remember?"

It seemed like he hadn't heard her, because he continued speaking. "You can find what you need without hurting anyone, and I'll help you. That's a promise." It was the same offer he gave all of the people he had to stop. One chance. Everyone deserved one chance. "So, do we have a deal?"

Rose froze. Dee Dee gasped. The professor stared, and Val gave a little shriek of surprise.

"Hold on," the hostess said, hand raised. "Did she?"

"She spoke first," Jethro answered.

"But she can't have," Val protested.

Her son nodded. "But she did. She spoke first."

Rose grabbed the Doctor's shoulder. "Doctor?" she called. He didn't respond, didn't even move, and he felt stiff, like a corpse that's gone into rigor mortis. Oh. Oh god. It had him. Whatever had Sky, it
"Oh," the thing that had been Sky said. "Look at that. I'm ahead of you." He followed her, his echo further behind than it had been.

"She definitely spoke first," Jethro observed.

"What's happening?" the professor demanded.

"I think it's moved," the thing said. "I think it's letting me go."

"No!" Rose snapped back. "Look at her, she doesn't look like Sky anymore." The thing's face was twisted in what was supposed to be delight, Rose thought, but looked more than a little sinister.

"What do you mean?" Dee Dee asked. "Letting you go from what?"

"He's the one doing it now," Bill said. "He's the one repeating—it's him."

"They're separating," the professor murmured.

"Stop it!" Rose yelled. "Don't you see what's happening? It hasn't moved at all! It's still there!"

They continued to ignore her. "Mrs. Silvestry," the professor inquired. "Is that you?"

"Yes," the thing said. "Yes it's me!" Every time she spoke the Doctor's echo slipped further and further behind, like she was feeding off of him somehow, siphoning off his energy. "I'm coming back," it continued. "Listen, it's me!"

"It's passed into the Doctor," Jethro suggested. "Whatever it is, it's transferred to him."

Dee Dee frowned. "No," she said slowly. "That's not what happened." Was it Rose's imagination, or did the thing flinch when Dee Dee spoke?

"But look at her!" Val protested, gesturing at the thing that had been Sky.

"Look at me," the thing agreed. "I can move; I can feel again. I'm coming back."

The Doctor was shaking beneath Rose's hand, like he was struggling to lift something immensely heavy. His eyes were wide and staring—and afraid. He looked like he was terrified. Rose supposed that he didn't have the corner on that market. She was close to terrified herself. She could feel the balance tipping, feel them slipping off the edge of that cliff.

"And look at him," the thing affirmed. "He can't move." She turned, and his eyes followed her. "Help me, professor," the thing implored. "Get me away from him—please?"

Rose tried to block the way, but the professor shouldered past her and helped the thing up off the ground. He led it back to where it stood with the others. Val embraced it and Biff placed a reassuring hand on its arm. Dee Dee regarded it suspiciously, and the hostess too seemed a bit unnerved. Jethro was ambivalent. He liked the Doctor, Rose knew, and the three of them might be the only potential allies they had left on the shuttle.

"It's him," Bill declared. "I said it was him, all the time."

"She's free!" Val agreed, delighted. "She's been saved."

"No," Rose repeated. "No, she's really not. Please believe me," she begged. "This isn't possession—"
I've seen possession—and it doesn't look like this! You don't just magically wake up! Whatever took hold of her hasn't let go, it's just changed. It's learned! It's imitating her, showing you what you want to see because it knows that the Doctor can stop it, and it's afraid!"

"I wouldn't touch her," Dee Dee said to Val, who was still holding the thing.

"But it's gone," Biff countered. "Passed into him. She's clean."

Dee Dee shook her head. "That's not what happened," she stated firmly.

"Thank you for your opinion, Dee Dee," the professor replied snidely. "But clearly Mrs. Silvestry has been released.

"No!" the young woman snapped.

"Just leave her!" Val shouted back. "She's safe, isn't she? Jethro," she said to her son, "it's let her go, hasn't it?"

"Looks like," he answered hesitantly. "Professor?"

"From observation," the old man said pompously. "The Doctor can't move, and when she was possessed she couldn't move either."

Bill interrupted him. "Well, there we are then. Now the only problem is what to do with this 'Doctor'."

"It's inside his head," the thing announced. "It killed the driver and the mechanic and now it wants us. He's waited so long, in the dark and the cold and the diamonds, until you cam—bodies so hot with blood and pain."

"Make him stop!" Val demanded, hysteria creeping back into her voice. "Oh my god, make him stop!"

"But she's saying it!" Dee Dee protested. "He's just echoing her!"

"But that's what the thing does!" Bill shouted. "It repeats!"

The hostess stepped forward. "Let her talk."

"What do you know?" he sneered. "You're just the help!"

"Just let her explain!" she requested.

Dee Dee swallowed. "I think," she began haltingly. "I mean, from what I've seen it repeats, then it synchronizes, then it moves on to the next step—exactly like the Doctor said it would!"

"And you're on his side?" Biff demanded angrily.

"No!" she replied, obviously frustrated.

"The voice is the thing," the man reminded her.

"And she's the voice!" Dee Dee snapped back. "Look at her—it's not possessing him, it's draining him."

"She's got his voice," the hostess murmured.
"But that's not true," Val said, talking so quickly she was almost incomprehensible. "Because it can't be true because I saw it pass out of her and into him, I saw it I did I know I did!

"So did I." Biff stood by his wife.

"But you didn't!" Dee Dee countered.

"It went from her to him!" Val's voice was getting louder, and her expression had changed from fear to anger. "You saw it, didn't you?" she demanded of Jethro.

The young man glanced back to Rose. "I—I don't know," he whispered.

"Oh, don't be stupid Jethro!" his mother snarled. "Of course you did!"

"Everyone saw her!" Biff agreed.

"You didn't!" Dee Dee stepped forward, eyes flashing. "I know what I saw, and you're just making it up! I saw her stealing his voice!"

Val dismissed her with a sneer. "She's as bad as he is, as that girl is. Someone shut her up!"

"What?" Dee Dee asked sarcastically. "You gonna throw me out too?"

"I think you should be quiet, Dee," the professor told her severely.

"I'm only saying," she began, but he cut her off.

"That's an order!" he raged. "You're making a fool out of yourself, pretending you're an expert in mechanics and hydraulics! Well, I can tell you that you're nothing more than average at best! Now, shut up!"

"Stop it!" Rose cried. "Don't you see what she's doing?"

"You can't trust her," the thing told them. "She's with him. They're in it together. They gain your trust, and then they get into your head, make you doubt yourself, wrap you up in fear and lies. He creeps into your head and whispers. Listen, just listen. That's him inside."

"Get him out of my head!" Val shrieked.

Biff added his voice to the call. "Yeah, we should throw him out!"

"Don't just talk about it!" his wife snapped. "You're useless—do something!"

"You watch me!" he roared.

A rustling sound followed by a loud 'click' drew their attention away from each other and back towards the Doctor. Rose stood between them and him and her gun was leveled at Sky. "I'm sorry," she said. Her voice was even, although her eyes were bright. "I don't want to use this, I really don't, but I will if I have to."

They stared at her. "She's got a gun!" Val cried.

"It's a psychokinetic wavelength disruptor," Rose corrected. "A stun gun." She held it with both hands, a finger on the trigger, her feet planted firmly against the ground. Her grip did not waver. "And if you take one step closer so help me god I will pull this trigger. Now, everyone just needs to take a deep breath and think. What she said about how it operating, I reckon that's pretty spot on,
because look at yourselves! You're talking about murder, about killing someone who's done nothing to you, who tried to help you!"

"You would say that," Val shot back. She'd seemed harmless enough at first, too terrified to do something, but now she was transformed. The thing seemed to know exactly what buttons to push in order to transform her from a loving mother to a terrified lump of jelly to a bloodthirsty antagonist. "You're on his side, you're in it together!"

Biff stepped forward. "Just let us throw him out and this will stop, it will all stop!"

A muscle in Rose's jaw twitched. "That's not going to happen," she replied, and something in her seemed to shift. Perhaps it was the light, or a flash of a torch, but for a moment her eyes seemed to glow golden. "You will not touch him."

"We are many," the thing declared. "And she is one person. Are you going to let her stand in the way? Throw him out!"

"Do it!" Val screamed, and spittle flew from her lips. "Do it you coward! Throw him out!"

Biff started forward and Rose removed the safety from the gun. It was like the dam broke as the others washed around her. The professor and Val grabbed her arms and wrested the gun away. Rose fought them but adrenaline fed off their fear and pumped into their veins, making them stronger. Val took her gun and smacked her over the back of the head. It hurt, and she was dizzy, but she held onto consciousness.

"No!" she howled. "Stop!" There was a strangeness to her voice, almost a duality, although no one else was speaking.

Biff grabbed the Doctor below his armpits and pulled, hauling him into the aisle proper.

"Get rid of him!" the thing instructed. "Now!" The man moved to comply, but the Doctor was stuck on a seat. His shoe was snagged on the edge.

"Help your father, Jethro!" Val screeched, but the boy hung back.

"Please!" Rose wailed. "You can't, you really can't! You have no idea what you're doing!" She tried to struggle but they held her down. "He's saved your lives so many times and you don't even know it!"

Dee Dee rushed forward. "Don't!"

Val glared at her. "It'll be you next." The girl turned pale and stepped back. Biff managed to get the Doctor's shoe loose, and he continued half-dragging him down the aisle. Rose closed her eyes and let the tears fall. Not like this, it couldn't end like this. She hadn't—hadn't even told him she loved him. He couldn't die without hearing that one last time. Couldn't die thinking she was still angry with him.

"I don't think we should do this!" the hostess asserted.

"It was your idea in the first place!" Biff shot back.

Val continued to egg him on. "Throw him out! Come on, do it now!" And the thing stood behind her, smirking at them, ready with an encouragement that was surgical in its precision.

"Cast him out into the sun," it crooned, "and the night. Do it." Jethro stood back against the wall, his hands over his ears and his eyes wide, like he couldn't believe what was happening. "That's the
"way," it told them gleefully. "You can do it. Molto Bene. Allons-y!"

The hostess froze. Those words, she remembered those words. He had used those words. It was true. What Dee Dee said was true. That woman—she wasn't a woman anymore, and she had stolen the Doctor's voice, and if she let them, the others would kill him. She glanced at the thing. Like the others, it was focused on the Doctor—he and Rose had seen through it, had wanted to stop it. It needed him gone.

She knew what she had to do. There wasn't time to think about. She launched herself at the thing that had once been Sky Silvestry, but was no more. One arm wrapped around the thing's waist and the other hand smashed into the emergency open button next to the door at the back of the shuttle. Blinding light poured in as the doors slid open and for six seconds the two of them stood there, outlined against Midnight's diamond landscape. Then the pressure seal collapsed and they were gone. The doors, acting on some kind of secondary alarm system, closed.

The Doctor twitched violently and Biff released him, jerking backwards in shock. The alien gasped, taking great heaving breaths as he lay on his back, eyes wide, staring at the ceiling. Rose fought the dizziness and wrestled away from Val and the professor, who were staring at the door where the hostess and the thing that had been sky had stood just a moment ago. She snatched the gun from the woman's limp hand and staggered over to where the Doctor lay. The others made no move to follow her, but she sat with her back against a seat, watching them, the gun held tightly in her hand.

"It's gone," he said over and over again. "It's gone."

"I said so, didn't I?" Val asked after a moment. "I said it was her."

Something dangerous flashed in Rose's eyes, and the gun was up and aimed at her before the woman finished. "You don't have the right to speak to him," she gritted out from between clenched teeth. "None of you do. You stay away from us, Val Cane, or I will not be responsible for my actions."

Suitably chastised, or perhaps just afraid, Val remained quiet until the transport showed up. Biff hugged her close, protectively, but his eyes were haunted whenever he glanced over at the Doctor. The professor was huddled at the base of a seat, his hands covering his mouth in a silent expression of horror. Dee Dee remained where she was, standing against the wall. Jethro joined her, and together they closed their eyes and tried to just breathe.

Rose let the hand clenched around her gun rest on her thigh. She carded the other hand through the Doctor's hair. He remained on the floor, staring at the ceiling, his eyes wide and unseeing. She hated when he looked like that, like he was trapped inside his head, and after what just happened she hated it even more.

Donna was waiting for them at the station when they arrived. The Doctor exited the shuttle under his own power, although he kept one arm draped around Rose and leaned on her a bit more than he would have wanted to admit.

"Oh my god!" the ginger woman exclaimed as she rushed towards them. "They said there was a problem with your shuttle, but what happened?"

Rose told her the tale over a bowl of 'authentic Earth-style' chips. Her hands were shaking, she noted distantly, when she went to lift some of the hot, starchy morsels to her lips. The other woman was
"I can't believe it," she murmured. "Ordinary people almost killed you."

"Ordinary people killed millions in the holocaust," Rose pointed out dully. "Ordinary people are just as capable of committing atrocities as the worst serial killer, if put in the right circumstances. And that—that thing—it knew how to craft those circumstances."

"What do you think it was?" she asked after a while.

"No idea," the Doctor replied roughly. "I know how it works, at least, I think I do. It had to be telepathic, to get into my head like that, sync up with my speech. Would have been easiest for me, thanks to the TARDIS and Time Lords' natural telepathic abilities."

"Do you think it's still out there?" she continued. He didn't answer, but he gave her a look that chilled her to the bone. "You'd better tell them," she continued. "This lot."

"Yeah," he replied after a long moment. "They can build a leisure palace somewhere else. Let this planet keep on turning 'roud an Xtonic star—in silence."
All was not well with the Doctor. Oh, he kept on a brave face for Donna, smiling and occasionally even laughing as they ate, but Rose could tell that he hadn't recovered from what happened inside the shuttle. She supposed it was a bit hypocritical of her to think less of him for hiding his distress, when she was very obviously doing the same thing.

He could have died. The thought ate away at her, made it hard for her to breathe. She was prepared for regeneration—with the way they lived their life, it was an eventuality that would most likely come sooner, rather than later, but she wasn't prepared to face the rest of her very long life without him. She'd told him that she would leave if he kept sending her away, and maybe she would, but she knew that if she did he would come after her. She believed that he wouldn't let it get that far, that he would stop her. If he didn't—it would probably kill her. Losing him would probably kill her.

Even in Pete's World she'd been sure she would see him again. It had kept her going when Torchwood locked her in a cell and cut her open to find what made her tick. If his shoe hadn't caught on the seat, if Dee Dee hadn't realized what was going on, if the hostess hadn't grabbed the thing that had been Sky—she would have lost him. He would have been gone. There were things he couldn't regenerate from, and being broken down into dust was one of them.

He was calm and commanding when they faced down the manager of the leisure palace and informed her of the situation. She wasn't happy—but she didn't fancy a lawsuit, or losing any more passengers. She also didn't fancy being responsible for unleashing a manipulative, malevolent life form on the universe, so she conceded their point. There were, after all, other, more hospitable places for their company to operate.

It wasn't until they got back to the TARDIS that the Doctor dropped his façade. The smile slid from his face like rain down a window. The fine lines around his eyes and the corners of his mouth deepened as his lips tugged down into a morose line. He seemed to fold in on himself, and despite his height and the strength she knew he possessed—he appeared fragile—old, and tired. There were dark circles under his eyes that she hadn't noticed, and a faint tremble of exhaustion that manifested when he moved. He looked like he could sleep for a week, and considering that he normally slept less than three hours a night, that was saying something.

Donna excused herself as Rose moved to support him. She wrapped one of her arms around his waist and he draped one of his over her shoulders, and together they moved to their bedroom. He remained silent until she shut the door behind him, and maneuvered them to the bed. The tension seemed to drain out of him as he lay back on the soft duvet. Rose kicked off her trainers (she'd decided against the strappy heels, and was glad of it—no one would have taken her seriously in those) and swung her legs up to lay beside him.
"Are you all right?" he asked her, his eyes searching as he reached a hand up to touch her face gently.

Rose bit her lip. "You almost died," she asked incredulously, "an' you're asking me if I'm okay?"

"I don't like it when people hurt you, Rose," he said quietly. "She hit you, and you were screaming, and there wasn't anything I could do about it."

"Yeah, there wasn't anything you could do about it," she agreed, "because that alien had its claws in you! An' there I was, being held down by a woman and an old man whilst they almost killed you!" She buried her face in his neck. "I've never felt so useless," she murmured against his skin.

He shifted so that one arm was stretched out beneath and around her. He ran his fingers through her hair gently. "I have," he told her, and she knew he was back in Canary Wharf, back in that white white room watching her fall.

"I don't want to lose you," she whispered.

"Oh, Rose." His arm tightened around her and he turned his head so that his chin rested on the crown of her skull. "I'm here. We're both here."

"Only because that woman died," she replied. "She gave up her life, saved us all, and no one bothered to ask her name."

"She was very brave," he agreed. "And that's what we hang onto—we remember her, even if we don't know her name." They were silent for a long moment, listening to the other's heartbeat and feeling the air swell their lungs. It felt like a gift, every moment.

"It wasn't much of a holiday," he admitted wearily, and he felt her lips curve into a smile against his skin.

"It was a very 'you' holiday," she agreed. "Although we didn't end up running for our lives, just sitting for them."

"Doesn't have the same ring," he said with a bit of a frown. "But I was thinking, we should go to Shan Shen next."

"Why's that?" she asked, her voice drowsy and her speech slow.

"They've got a fabulous New Year's festival. It was colonized in the 26th Century by a group of people from China, and they kept a lot of the old traditions as well as made some new ones. They've got this drink, it's a bit like tea, but better, and—" He paused. "Rose?" he called. "Rose, are you listening?" A soft sigh was her response, and he realized, with a smile, that she'd drifted off to sleep. His ramblings could wait. As it happened, he was quite tired himself, and when she woke they would go to Shan Shen.
River Song plugged in Jack Harkness's coordinates and touched the comlink nestled in her right ear cavity. "Control, this is River Song. I'm attempting another jump and I've received confirmation that the coordinates are correct." She smiled. "Courtesy of Jack Harkness."

"Roger that, River," Mickey Smith's voice rang out in her ear. "Good luck. I get the next jump, yeah? 'S a bit boring, sitting around here."

"Deal," she told him, and pushed the 'jump' button on the Dimension Cannon. Mickey Smith, she thought, was an uncommon sort of man. She'd never met him so young before, and she realized that she must be coming close to the end. She'd known him as Martha's husband, as Rose's best friend, a dependable, loyal man who just happened to be a whiz with a computer. She was glad that even this young he still possessed those core traits. She'd heard stories from Rose and the Doctor, stories of when he was, well, less than brave, but she forgave him. Everyone had to start somewhere. Her own beginnings were, after all, less than auspicious.

When the light cleared from her eyes she was standing on a street. It was dark and cold and she could see the Thames from where she stood. Bright fairy lights glittered in the windows of houses and shops and decorated pine trees peaked out from behind half-closed drapes. London, then, at Christmas. There was a flash from overhead and something white and glowing drifted through the air. It was getting larger, she realized. But no, it was getting closer. And as it drew near she realized when she was.

She'd heard the story of how Donna Noble saved the Doctor's life a thousand times. The ginger woman always tried to play it off as unimportant but River knew how it felt to lose someone vital, like the Doctor had when Rose was trapped in the alternate universe. She knew that he, at least, credited Donna with being the one to pull him back, to stop him from simply standing on the platform beneath the Thames and drowning along with the Racnoss. The star, but it wasn't a star, it was a web and a space ship, hovered in the sky for a moment, and then beams of crackling white energy arced towards the ground.

Donna Noble, newly-promoted personal assistant to Judal Chowdry, was in a pub. It was Christmas eve and she had something to celebrate, despite her general apathy toward the holiday. She bought another round of drinks for her friends because she could afford it and tried to ignore the way that Alice kept looking at her back. She'd caught other people doing it, strangers on the street, coworkers, and every time she went home and checked there was nothing there.

Someone poked their head inside, beaming. "Come and see! There's a star, a Christmas star!"

Of course it wasn't really a star. Donna figured that out when it started killing people. For a moment...
everything seemed so familiar, and she took off at a run towards the Thames, and the star. She didn't know why but something deep inside her seemed to think that it was the right thing to do, and as she had no evidence to the contrary, she obeyed.

She arrived by the Thames just in time to see a group of funny-looking soldiers load a cloth-covered body into a waiting ambulance. One soldier had a walkie, and seemed to be talking to someone he called 'Mr. Saxon.' That would be the minister for defense. As the paramedics lifted the stretcher into the back of the ambulance a suit-jacket clad arm came loose and a thin metallic cylinder with a blue tip clattered onto the ground. It went unnoticed amid the general hubbub. The soldier on the walkie mentioned someone called 'the Doctor,' presumably the dead man, and other strange things, something called a 'racnoss,' and 'regeneration,' whatever that was. She didn't know why, but seeing the body and the little metal thing made her want to cry.

The doors on the ambulance slammed shut, and it drove off. She turned to walk away and almost ran directly into a woman barreling towards her.

"What happened?" she panted, brushing sandy blond curls back from a tan face and bright blue eyes. "Did they find someone?"

"I dunno," Donna replied. There was something oddly familiar about the woman.

River Song had to stop herself from staring. The woman in front of her, the woman who most definitely was not in a wedding dress or anywhere near where she should be—was Donna Noble. She realized with a start that the other woman had continued speaking.

"Sorry, what?" she asked.

"Some bloke called the Doctor," Donna reiterated.

River glanced around expectantly. "Well, where is he?"

Donna bit her lip. "He's dead. I'm sorry."

River turned white. No, no no no no no. It wasn't possible. The Doctor couldn't die now. She'd seen him die, and it definitely wasn't underneath the Thames! But then she saw, lying on the cobbled street, the sonic screwdriver. She felt like the floor had just dropped out from under her.

"Did you know him?" Donna asked sympathetically. "I mean, they never mentioned his name. Could have been any doctor."

"No," River whispered, and sank down on her knees besides the little metal tube. She picked it up, holding it reverently, like he did. "The world is wrong, Donna Noble." Then she pocketed the device, stood, and walked away. Donna ran after her, wanting to know what she meant by that, and more importantly, how the woman had known her name, but by the time she rounded the corner—the woman was gone.

It was possible that Jack got the coordinates wrong, she figured, so River Song jumped ahead, to when the Doctor first met Martha Jones. Except that he didn't. The Royal Hope hospital disappeared, all right, but the Doctor was nowhere in sight, nor was the TARDIS. The Dimension Cannon was
designed to find him, to go to him, but there was no trace. Nothing registered on her monitor. The
Hospital vanished and returned, but Sarah Jane Smith was the one who thwarted the plasmavore and
lost her life in the bargain, as did her young friends. The sole survivor was a young man training to
be a doctor. He had only lived because Martha Jones gave him the last oxygen tank—and then died.

But that was wrong. It was all wrong. Where was the Doctor?

Everywhere she jumped the world was wrong. The timeline was twisted, altered, changed
completely. She felt nauseous, like she wanted to crawl out of her skin. There was no sign anywhere,
not of Rose, nor the Doctor. People didn't just disappear. It wasn't possible; even when they were
taken by the Rift there was a residual energy, a sign of their presence. But Rose—there was no sign
that she'd ever made it back from Pete's World and the Doctor's body was apparently cryogenically
frozen at UNIT headquarters. She hit the recall button. It was time to figure out what the hell was
going on.

She'd reprogrammed the quick recall button as soon as Mickey had accepted her offer of help. It
wouldn't do to be jumping around between universes—according to the new time line he hadn't gone
back, and she intended to keep it that way. Their base of operations was a threadbare apartment in
51st century Califrax Minor. It was small and more than a little scruffy, but it was cheap and the
landlord didn't ask questions.

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Mickey was fuming when the light cleared. "What the hell was that?" he demanded. "You jumped
five times, River! I thought you said those coordinates were good!"

She shook her head. "Something is wrong, Mickey. Something big. The coordinates should have
been perfect—but when I used them—" She shuddered. "He was dead, Mickey. The Doctor was
dead."

He frowned, lines creasing his forehead. "But I thought you said you knew him, in the future."

"I do!" she yelled and began to pace. "The whole thing doesn't make any sense!

"Could you have got the stories wrong?" he ventured, but she shook her head fiercely.

"Not possible," she told him. "According to what I saw, he died before he met Donna Noble, and
I'm not talking about regeneration, I'm talking about real, proper death, and I know for a fact that
didn't happen." She stopped pacing and sank down abruptly onto one of the chairs that littered the
room. "This," she said with great emphasis, "is wrong. If the Doctor never met Donna, than I would
never have been born, but I'm still here! And I still remember! And here—now—everything is as it
should be! It's like hopping into a different universe, but there were no alternate Time Lords. They
only ever existed once." And then she paused, eyes wide.

"What?" Mickey asked. "What is it?"

"Oh," she said. "Oh! Of course!"

Mickey rolled his eyes. "Honestly, you sound just like him. Out with it, then."

"What if," she began, her eyes bright. "What if it wasn't another universe, but another timeline? What
if someone pulled Donna out of the main time line, the real one, and put her in an alternate time line,
a might-have-been? And Jack knew about it, so he gave me coordinates that would take me where I
needed to go?"
"Hold on a tick," he interrupted. "How would Jack know about that?"

"It had already happened for him," she explained. "I got there a bit late, and he said it, oh that clever man!" She laughed, delighted. Mickey still looked confused. "Donna Noble is one of the most important women in the universe," she continued, "because she kept the Doctor alive. He met her just after he managed to say goodbye to Rose, and if she hadn't been there to pull him back, he would have drowned underneath the Thames and not regenerated." She paused. "He might have chosen not to."

Mickey's eyes were wide. "He can do that?"

She nodded. "The Doctor's never had a very strong grasp on regeneration, but even he could stop the process from occurring. He almost did, after the Time War, but something gave him pause." She smiled. "He said he heard a wolf howling, and it reminded him that life was all around him."

"So," he began. "What are we going to do?"

River Song stood. "We're going to get Donna Noble out of that alternate timeline and back where she belongs."

Brigadier Sir Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart could not sleep. It was an unusual situation for him. His days in UNIT taught him early on to grab sleep whenever and wherever possible, despite anything that was happening around him. Doris quite frequently told him that he slept like the dead. It was a stray thought, but enough to send him over to the liquor cabinet in the corner of the room. His hands shook as he poured himself a glass of brandy. A scrap of paper sat on the desk, a note from Brigadier Bambera.

I regret to inform you that the confirmation is irrefutable—the Doctor is dead.

He didn't want to believe it. His relationship with the Doctor was complex, and often difficult. The alien was as infuriating as he was brilliant, but he had to admit that his life had changed irrevocably when Alistair met him. They'd been friends of a sort for most of his life, and apparently most of the Doctor's as well. He'd known him in every incarnation except for this latest one. The last time he saw the Doctor it was just after the Time War. He had shown up on their doorstep one day, half dead and barely coherent. It had taken days for him to recover physically, and weeks before he started talking again. And then he'd left. They'd offered their home to him, assured he could stay as long as he needed, but he'd brushed them off with a grin and a wave.

Alistair had reports of sightings. There was the thing with the Slitheen and Downing street, and that had the Doctor's fingerprints all over it, although he still wondered how the alien managed to get ahold of a submarine missile. Later there was the Sycorax and the spaceship over London. Torchwood destroyed it but the UNIT liaison to Prime Minister Harriet Jones had reported that the Doctor's intervention had them leaving first. In both instances there were rumors of a companion, a young woman named Rose. Apparently UNIT had been building a file on her, but it was wiped from the system by the BADWOLF virus.

He walked back to his desk and sank down into the comfortable chair. Next to the paper was a small pile of seemingly random items. As the Doctor was the sole survivor of his race, he had no living relatives, no one to claim his personal affects—no one but Alistair. So he had. It was a strange collection, apparently found in the alien’s pockets. Although he drowned there was no sign of water damage to the packs of gum, ball of string, three Euros and five pence, kazoo, 3-D glasses, cassette tape of Ian Dury’s greatest hits, the copy of William Butler Yeat's The Wind Among the Rushes, and
most curiously, three photographs.

The first was of three people—two men and a young woman. The man on the left was the Doctor as Alistair last saw him, except that he was wearing a leather jacket and an ear-splitting grin. The man on the right was Jack Harkness, of Torchwood. Captain Jack, as he preffered to be called, was not Alistair's favorite person, but that was largely due to his employment. Torchwood always left a rather bitter taste in his mouth. He knew their kind and he knew their aim, and he disagreed with both entirely.

But it was the woman in the middle, the same woman who was in all three pictures, that gave him pause. She had one arm wrapped around the Doctor and the other wrapped around Jack, but whilst the two of them were looking at the camera, the Doctor was looking at her. On the back of the picture, in precise, neat handwriting, was: *The Doctor, Me, and Jack: Cardiff, 21st Century.*

The second picture contained only two people, the woman again and the Doctor in his last form. They were both wearing paper crowns: hers pink, and his red, and they were standing in front of a Christmas tree, beaming. The caption on that picture read, *The New New Doctor and Me: Mum's, Christmas 2006.* It was a strange image, so domestic for an alien who scorned anything resembling every-day human life.

The third image was a candid shot. The woman was lying on her back, propped up on her forearms on what looked like a long brown coat. Her eyes were closed and her face was tilted up towards the sun. A small smile tugged at her lips and the wind blew her hair wildly around her. The writing on the back of the photo was different, angled more sharply and less tidy. *Rose, New Earth.*

That was the mysterious Rose, the Doctor's latest companion. Where was she, he wondered, when the Doctor died? He couldn't believe that she would have left him alone. There was a great deal of affection obvious in each of the photos, and perhaps something more. He emptied the glass and deposited it next to the pictures.

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A flash of light left him as good as blind. When the spots finally cleared he was staring at a strange woman with sandy curls and bright blue eyes. "Who in blazes are you?" he demanded, quietly, as Doris had already gone to bed. "And what do you think you're doing here?"

The woman only smiled. "Hello, Alistair. I'm Professor River Song. You haven't met me yet, and if you don't help me, than you never will." She leaned forward. "I'm here about the Doctor."

He sighed. "I'm sorry, but the Doctor is dead."

River shook her head. "I know that you feel it, Alistair." There was a fierce urgency in her voice that compelled him to listen to her. "This isn't what's supposed to happen. I'm from the future, the Doctor's personal future." She leaned forward. "Alistair—the world is wrong."

He studied her appraisingly. "Even if I believe you, Professor Song, what do you propose to do about it?"

She began to pace. "Someone has altered the time line, but the Vortex is fighting back. If the Time Lords were still around they'd be here in a heartsbeat to correct it, because this isn't what's supposed to happen. We need to find out when the change occurred, and how it was done."

"How?" he asked.
"The TARDIS," she replied. "Does UNIT still have it in storage?"

"Of course," he told her. "But you'll never get in. The Doctor was the only one able to open it."

River grinned, and held up a key attached to a thin chain. "I was a resident for some time, Alistair, and I never go anywhere without my TARDIS key."

Convincing Bambera that River Song wasn't crazy took a bit of doing, but in the end Alistair's remaining UNIT clout as Brigadier and a close associate of the Doctor won out. When River entered the TARDIS she fought the urge to cry. It was dark and the air was stale—musty. There was no welcoming hum, no warm presence in the back of her mind. It felt like stepping into a tomb. She ran a hand over the console and up to the Time Rotor. It wheezed and shifted a few times, but the emptiness remained.

"I know," she murmured. "I'm going to fix it. Please, help me fix it." The monitor flickered to life.

"Thank you."

"What are you doing?" Alistair asked as she typed away, eyes fixed on the monitor in front of her.

"Scanning for interference. This whole situation centers around a woman named Donna Noble," she replied.

He frowned. "Who is she?"

A small smile spread River's lips. "One of the most important women in all of creation. She saved the Doctor's life when he wanted to die, but someone kept her from meeting him. In my timeline, the real timeline, the Doctor is alive and well, and jaunting around the universe with Rose." He blinked and she noticed. "You've met. Of course, not yet, but you will. She speaks very highly of you."

He really had nothing to say to that. "I see," he finally settled on.

She laughed. "No you don't, but you will." There was a stuttering sort of electrical sound, and then a slot beneath the console spat out several sheets of paper. River collected them and handed the bundle to Alistair. "Right. Get your people working on this. It needs to be ready by September 2008."

"Any particular reason why?" he wanted to know.

"This is what's going to send Donna Noble back, so she can make the right choice, and wipe this timeline out of existence," River explained. "And according to what I've seen, three weeks into September of 2008 is when Donna Noble dies."
River rubbed her eyes as she waited for the inevitable flash of light that accompanied her jumps to die down. Now that UNIT was underway, it was time to convince Donna to trust her, and to go with her, and to fix everything. Her first attempt had been, well, less than stellar. She hoped that Donna had listened to her, that she would use the raffle ticket left over from her previous position as Mr. Chowdry's personal assistant to get out of London for Christmas.

Without the Doctor to stop the replica of the Titanic from crashing into Buckingham Palace the entire city was destroyed, wiped out in a nuclear explosion from the ship's engines. River had tried to explain as much as she could, which wasn't much at all, really, but Donna was having none of it. The fire and bravado that she loved about the woman was definitely working against her.

Why do you keep looking at my back? What's on my back?

That had to be it, the creature that altered the timeline, that pulled Donna Noble from where she had to be. River had no idea what it was. She couldn't even see it, couldn't touch it if she tried, but out of the corner of her eye she thought she glimpsed something black and shiny, something with a hard carapace and six legs—some kind of insect.

Mickey was waiting for her, as usual, but something was different. A willowy young woman with blue-green eyes and strawberry blonde hair was leaning against the doorway, waiting for her. River blinked. "Jenny? What are you doing here?"

Jenny gave her a hug, and then arched an eyebrow. It was one more gesture she'd picked up from her father, although the accent was from Rose. "What d'you think? Dad sent me. Said I had to be here, something about closing a time-loop."

River pushed a stray curl back behind her ear. "Right. Well, we've already got a bungled timeline on the table, why not at a time-loop to that? Any idea what you're supposed to do?"

The other woman shrugged. "I think I'm supposed to be there when you find them."

Donna Noble was not amused. She and her mum and her granddad had spent three months living in a bloody hostel because the bloody Titanic had demolished their home in the city, and now the social worker wanted her to move to bloody Leeds!

"I'm not moving to Leeds!" she protested.

"I'm afraid it's Leeds, or you can wait in the hostel for another three months," the woman told her. Donna wrinkled her nose. She definitely didn't want to go back. It was packed—ten or twelve people to each room, bunk beds, no privacy, screaming babies and rambunctious children everywhere.
Her mum bit her lip. "All I want is a washing machine," she admitted.

"What about Glasgow?" Donna continued. "I heard there was jobs going in Glasgow."

The social worker was out of patience. "It's Leeds," she snapped, "or nothing. The whole of southern England is flooded with radiation. We've got seven million people in need of shelter, and now France has closed its borders. You can't pick and choose!" She slapped a stamp down on their folder and shoved it off to the side. "Next!"

"When are you?" River asked Jenny as they moved from the doorway into the flat proper.

"We went to Space Florida last week," the younger woman replied. "The time that Mum convinced Dad that swim trunks are cool, not the time he decided swimming in tweed was a good idea, or the time that Jack crashed the party and tried to ply him with alcohol."

River grinned. "That was an interesting night."

"Hold on," Mickey said firmly. "Who are you, exactly?" He was just a little touchy about random people showing up at their supposedly secret flat. They were, after all, on a mission to find the Doctor, and he could think of any number of beings who would like to get their hands on the Time Lord.

"I'm Jenny," she told him, like he was being incredibly thick. "An' you're Micky, an'—oh." Her eyes widened. "You haven't met me yet! No wonder you gave me that funny look." She held out her hand. "Like I said, I'm Jenny. It's short for generated anomaly, but Mum decided that 'Jennifer' sounds nicer, so that's what she calls me when she's cross. I'm the Doctor's daughter."

Mickey's jaw dropped. "His daughter? He can have kids? Does Rose know about this?"

Jenny frowned. "Obviously. She was there when I was born. Well, I say born. Can you be born if you're created by a machine? What defines birth?"

"Okay, I believe you're his daughter now," Mickey remarked dryly.

Life as a refugee left much to be desired. Donna, her mum, and her granddad lived in a house with seventeen other people. They slept in the kitchen on camp cots. One family had the upstairs and the other family (consisting of a husband and wife, and the wife's sister and her husband and children, and her niece's children, and the husband's mother) had the front room and back bedroom. It was crowded and noisy and it drove Donna half-mad.

"You'll see," she told her mother as they lay in bed trying to ignore the sound of raucous sea shanties from the next room over. "I'll go into town tomorrow and find work. Everybody need's secretaries."

Unfortunately, she was wrong. Jobs were almost non-existent, and she didn't have the proper credentials for military work.

"We'll settle in," Wilf assured her confidently. "Bit of wartime spirit, yeah?"

But that was the point. There wasn't a war. There was no goal to work toward, no end in sight—just the prospect of living this life day after day, caught in the legal limbo of being a refugee. As her mum told her, they couldn't even vote. There was no one to complain to, no one who would listen. They
were three in a sea of millions, lost in the throng of faces that no one wanted to see.

Sometimes she caught herself looking for the strange woman with the blonde, curly hair—the woman she'd met by the Thames, the woman who saved her and her family's life. Months passed without a sighting, and she decided that it was just a coincidence, just one more strange thing in a strange, strange world. And then in the fall of 2008 vehicles started spouting a strange, white gas.

They were in the middle of a rousing rendition of Queen's 'Bohemian Rhapsody' when they heard the shots. They were close, just outside the house. The song died, like a switch had been flipped. One of the boys who lived upstairs went to the door, but Rocco Colosato, the patriarch of the family that occupied the front room, pushed him back. "Stay," he told them. Of course Donna and Wilf ignored him and followed him out into the street. Soldiers were shooting at the cars. A strange, thick white gas poured from every exhaust pipe. It drifted through like a malevolent fog and left a disgusting, starchy taste in Donna's mouth.

Rocco was berating the soldiers. "Firing at the car is not so good!" he yelled. "You crazy, or what?"

"It's this ATMOS thing," the soldier explained. He was young, Donna realized, probably younger than she was, and he looked scared. "It won't stop! It's like gas, it's toxic!"

"Well, switch it off!" Wilf replied impatiently and pointed at the car.

"It is off!" another soldier replied.

"It's still going," the first soldier replied. "It's all of them—every single ATMOS car. They've gone mad." He trailed off as Donna turned to glance back at her mum. In a flash his gun was back up and aimed directly at her. "You!" he barked. "Lady, turn 'round!" She stared at him, uncomprehending. "Turn around, now!"

Rocco and Wilf were yelling at the soldier. "Put that gun down, boy!" her granddad shouted.

The soldier was having none of it. "I said turn 'round!" he repeated, and he and his comrade kept their weapons trained on Donna. She held up her hands and turned around in a circle, her heart pounding fit to burst. She'd never had a gun pointed at her, before. Had hardly seen them, to tell the truth. She found herself wondering what it felt like to get shot. If they were going to kill her, she didn't want them to do it in front of her mum and granddad. No one needed to see that.

His eyes widened as she presented her back to him. Whatever he thought he saw wasn't there. "Sorry," he said softly. "I thought—"

Wilf was about ready to burst a vein. She'd never seen him so angry. "Call yourself a soldier?" he snarled as he stood just in front of the boy. "Pointing guns at innocent women? You're a disgrace!" he snapped. "In my day you'd have been court-martialed!"

Donna, however, had stopped paying attention. There was a strange flash of light coming from an alley a few doors down. It was familiar—and then she remembered. The last time she saw it, something that was like lightning without thunder, was when she saw the curly-haired woman. She started toward it. Her mum was calling her, asking her to come back, telling her to leave it alone, but she ignored her cries. She wanted answers.

Donna reached the mouth of the alley, and stopped. She blinked. There was someone waiting for her—but it was a young black man with a scruffy beard, not an older woman with bright blue eyes and curly blonde hair.
"You're Donna Noble," he said in a thick London accent. "Nice to meet you at last. I'm Mickey Smith."

Mickey led her to a park bench. The wind was brisk and kept the fog from rolling in too densely. Donna was grateful. At least they could see the stars here, and it was nice not having to breathe the strange fumes.

"We're lucky," he told her. "S not so bad here. It's the ATMOS devices. Britain hasn't got that much petrol, but all over Europe, China, South Africa, they're getting choked by gas."

"Can't anyone stop it?" she asked him.

"Sure," he told her. "Working on it now. They're onboard the Sontaran ship." There was a strange sort of rumbling sound, and then the sky was filled with fire. It swept from horizon to horizon, burning off the gas that had collected in the atmosphere. Donna gaped. "Tha' was the Torchwood team," Mickey said quietly. "Gwen Cooper, Ianto Jones—they gave their lives, and Captain Jack Harkness was transported back to the Sontaran home-world." A strange sort of smile twisted his lips. "UNIT's the only thing left defending Earth."

She looked blankly at him. "What?"

"UNIT," he repeated. "United Intelligence Taskforce. They protect the Earth from hostile alien threats."

"Normally I'd say you were a nutter, believing in aliens," she mused, "but not now. Not after what's happened." She paused. "Why wouldn't that other woman tell me her name?"

Mickey snorted. "River worries too much. She's like the Doctor. Me, I figure that none of this was supposed to happen anyway, so nothing I can say will destabilize the situation any more than it already is."

Donna frowned. "What do you mean, 'not supposed to happen'?"

He gestured expansively. "All of this is wrong, Donna. There's this bloke, this alien bloke called the Doctor, and he stopped it, he stopped it all from happening. The Titanic never crashed into Buckingham Palace. He stopped the Sontarans. Captain Jack is alive and well and working in Cardiff with his team. River calls it an 'altered time line.' It's one way the universe could have gone, one way events could have unfolded—but they didn't."

She snorted. "Now you're talking rubbish. Of course all of those things happened! We're living them!"

"That's the point," he countered. "You shouldn't be. In the real timeline, the right timeline, you travel with the Doctor, and a friend of mine named Rose." He leaned back and rested his arms on top of the bench. "She was my girl, was Rose, before she met the Doctor." It was his turn to snort. "After, well, can't really compete with all of time and space, now can I? But you, you saved his life, Donna Noble, except that in this time line you didn't."

"He was the man," she realized. "The one who died, the one by the Thames on Christmas."

Mickey nodded. "But he wasn't meant to. You were supposed to be there; you made him leave."

A memory hit her like a tonne of bricks, and she was standing in a cavernous room. A thing like a
giant, scarlet spider-woman was howling in the middle of the room as water poured in and sparks showered down from the ceiling. Presiding over the terrifying scene was a man—a tall, thin man in a suit. His hair was slicked down with water and he was holding a remote control in his hands, but what she noticed were his eyes. They were dark and hard and empty, so empty, like someone had reached into his chest and pulled out his heart.

"Doctor!" she heard herself shout. "You can stop now!" And he glanced down, and she could see his humanity return, degree by degree, until she found that she could meet his gaze without the desperate urge to flee.

She pushed herself off of the bench and stood, arms wrapped around herself although it wasn't cold. "Stop it," she told him. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

He watched her for a moment. "I know it's scary," he said finally. "I was terrified of the Doctor when I first met him. I clung to Rose, told her not to go with him. Maybe—maybe if I hadn't, if I'd been a bit braver, maybe she'd still be my girl and none of what came next would have happened." He leaned forward. "But it did, and right now, Donna Noble, it all comes down to you, because something's coming, something worse than all of this."

"Leave me alone!" she yelled and started to walk away. He followed her.

"The whole world is stinking!" she snapped. "How could anything be worse than this?"

"The darkness is coming." He ran a hand through his close-cropped hair, unconsciously echoing the Doctor. "This whole thing started out as a way to get Rose home. She's trapped, right now, in a parallel universe—but then the stars started going out. We need the Doctor, and in order to find him, we've got to get you back where you belong."

"Why are you telling me this?" she shouted at him, tears standing in her eyes. "What do you mean, it all comes down to me? What am I supposed to do! I'm a temp from Chiswick! I'm nothing special!"

"Donna Noble," he said seriously. "On that night you were the most important woman in the whole of creation."

She sneered at him. "Oh, don't. Just don't. That might work on the girls at the pub, but you don't fool me, mate."

"I need you to come with me," he continued, undaunted. "Me or River."

"An' why should I do that?" she shot back.

He shrugged. "Because you want to save the world? Because you believe that I'm not a nutter?" He glanced around. "Because you can't help wishin' for something more than this? You pick the reason, but you'll come—only when you want to, 'course."

"You're gonna have a long wait," she told him and turned to go.

He sighed. "Not really, just three weeks."

Donna paused. "All right, I'll bite. Why three weeks?" What the hell, she figured. In for a penny, in for a pound.

"Does your grandfather still have that telescope?" he asked. She blinked at the non-sequitor.

"He never lets go of it," she replied slowly. Just how much had he been watching her? Was he
stalking her?

"Three weeks time," he repeated. "But you've got to be certain, because I'm sorry, I really am—but
you're gonna die." And then there was lightning without thunder, and he was gone. She stared at the
place where he stood, tears running down her cheeks to drip off her chin. It wasn't every day you
found out when you were going to die.

She thought it couldn't get any worse. She thought that the squalor and the wretchedness of their
lives couldn't be topped. She thought the world had hit rock bottom, living in Leeds with seventeen
other people (not including her mum and granddad) and relying on government aide to put food of a
sort on the table. She was wrong.

The soldiers were taking the others. Rocco Colosato and his family, the other family from upstairs,
they were piled into the back of a government truck with all of their belongings. The ever-cheerful
man said goodbye as exuberantly as he'd said hello.

He grabbed Donna up in a bear hug. "And you!" he exclaimed. "I'm going to miss you most of all—
all flame hair and fire!"

He'd grated on her nerves when they'd first arrived, but in the months that followed he'd grown on
her. His unfailing optimism and ability to make her laugh had gotten them through the suffocating
closeness of their quarters. "But why do you have to go?" she asked.

He shrugged. "It's the new law, England for the English and all that. They can't send us home—the
oceans are closed. They build labor camps."

She frowned. "I know, but labor doing what? There aren't any jobs. I should know, I've been
looking." Behind her, Wilf looked uncomfortable. He'd been out of sorts all week, ever since they'd
heard about the coming relocations.

For a moment Rocco's bubbly mask slipped, but only for moment. "Oh, sewing," he said
expansively, "digging—is good!" With one last round of enthusiastic kisses on the cheek, he released
Donna. Wilf stepped forward, and the other man gave him a smart salute. "Wilfred," he
acknowledged gravely, "my captain."

There were tears in her granddad's eyes, Donna realized, as he returned the salute. Then Rocco
nodded and was hustled into the truck. Wilf looked away.

"It'll be quiet with them gone," Donna noted, "but still, we'll have more room."

"Labor camps," her granddad said, his voice wavering. "That's what they called them last time too."

Donna glanced back at him. "How do you mean?" She returned her gaze to the truck. Rocco held
his wife tightly. Her face was pressed against his jacket, and Donna could see her shoulders heaving.
She was sobbing. And his eyes were pressed tightly shut, his lips a thin slash. It was strange seeing
him without a smile. He was always smiling. A sinking feeling was growing in her stomach, fear and
a terrible idea.

They called them labor camps before.

"It's happening again," Wilf continued, his eyes haunted as he watched the truck pull onto the street.

"What is?" she asked, but he wouldn't answer. He pressed his lips tightly together and shook his
head. She started after the truck, which was moving slowly down the cobbled road. "Excuse me!" she called. "Where are you taking them?" There was no answer, not from the soldiers nor the people being taken. "Where are you taking them?" she demanded again, but the truck had reached one of the main streets, and its speed picked up, and she was left standing in the middle of the road, staring after it as it faded from view.

She was sitting on the hill with her granddad when it happened. He had his telescope out, like he always did, and there was a fire burning, and they had a thermos full of tea. They didn't talk much, not like they used to before everything went to hell. She remembered what Mickey said, what the woman, River, said. The world is wrong. Yes, it was. It was horribly, terribly wrong, but how could they change it? What could she do?

"We'd get a bit of cash if we sold this thing," Wilf said, apropos of nothing, and gestured at his telescope.

Donna blinked. "Don't you dare!" she told him, and then sighed. "I always imagined, your old age, I'd have put a bit of money by, make you comfy. Never did." She sighed again. "I'm just useless." Wilf, however, wasn't paying much attention. He checked the telescope, muttered something, and then checked it again. She frowned. "You're supposed to say, 'no, you're not.'"

"Must be the alignment," he continued to himself.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I dunno! It can't be the lens, 'cause I was looking at Orion, the constellation of Orion. You take a look." He motioned for her to move forward. "Tell me what you see."

Donna looked down into the telescope's viewfinder, and then back up at her granddad. "Nothing," she said. "There's nothing there."

"It's working!" he exclaimed. "The telescope is working!"

"Maybe it's the clouds," she offered.

"There are no clouds," he scoffed. And then he froze. And pointed. Donna followed the line of his outstretched hand to the sky and her jaw dropped. The stars were going out. Faster and faster pinpricks of light were disappearing from the sky. It was nowhere near dawn, and there was no tell-tale lightness at the eastern edge of the horizon. It was as if someone was taking a giant eraser and simply wiping entire constellations—solar systems and supernovas and whole galaxies—out of existence. "Oh my god, Donna," her granddad whispered. "The stars are going out!"

The darkness is coming. And she knew, she knew it was time. She turned around, and the woman, River, was standing behind them. She was wearing the same clothes she always wore—her gray leather jacket pulled tightly around her to ward off the chill of the night. She was watching them with a strange, sad look on her face. And Donna knew. She was going to die, but this world, it wasn't worth living in, not if something better could take its place. Not if all of those people who died in London could be alive again. Not if Rocco and his family could be back home, where they belonged, not in some holocaust-type labor camp.

"I'm ready," she told the other woman. River nodded.
Four hours later Donna Noble found herself getting out of a UNIT truck. They were at a military base just outside London. River led the way, and Donna had the impression that she'd been there frequently, and recently. They were stopped just inside the perimeter by one of the red-bereted soldiers. He snapped a salute. "Ma'am, Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart would like to see you."

"I said before, don't salute," River replied. "And we're a bit busy right now."

"It's important, Ma'am," he said respectfully, but firmly. "I'm to take you to him. Miss Noble is to accompany as well."

River sighed. "Very well then, lead on."

Alistair was waiting for them in an office that had been carved out of the warehouse with temporary walls. UNIT was well-versed in erecting mobile bases, and it showed. A large desk and comfortable chair were the only furniture. Alistair occupied the chair, and standing in front of his desk was someone River knew very well. She froze. Rose Tyler was staring back at her, looking at her like she'd never seen her before in her life.

And then River realized that she probably hadn't, because this wasn't her Rose. The woman was thinner than River had ever seen her. There were lines around the corners of her eyes and mouth that shouldn't have been there. She looked like she hadn't eaten in days and slept in longer, but the greatest change was her eyes. Even when she was angry, even when she was terrified, there was a spark of warmth, an empathy that she carried behind the brown orbs.

This woman looked like the Doctor after a very bad week. Her eyes were hard, cold, and completely empty. It was like someone had closed a door behind them, blocking any trace of the kind, compassionate soul within.

"You're River song?" she asked. "The Brigadier tells me you know the Doctor." River could only nod. Something that might have been hope flashed across not-Rose's face for just a second. "Where is he?"

River swallowed. "I'm sorry," she said finally. "I'm so sorry—but he's dead." She blinked, and then she was pinned against the wall. Not-Rose's hand was against her throat, holding her firmly, but gently. She could still breathe, although she was unable to move.

"If you are lying," the woman said, her voice quiet and frozen, "it will go very poorly for you."

"I'm not," River swore. "But this—all this is wrong. It wasn't supposed to happen. We're trying to fix it." Donna was watching, wide eyed. Alistair was a second away from summoning the soldiers, but River frowned. She could handle this by herself. She had to. Bringing guns into the situation would only make it escalate, and she really didn't want to find out what would happen then.

Not-Rose studied her for a moment, and then let her go. She looked pale, and tired, and old, and River finally realized why. There was a weight behind her eyes, a weight she'd never seen before. "How old are you?" she asked finally.

"Five-hundred and twenty-nine in April," not-Rose replied wearily.

It took a surprisingly short amount of time to explain what was happening to the alternate Rose. It might have been her greater experience with all things alien and strange, but River thought that it was more likely her desire for this not to be right that drove her understanding. River could sympathize. She didn't want to live in a universe without the Doctor either. Alistair left them in the stiff but
capable hands of Captain Erisa Magambo—one of UNIT'S senior officers.

Their first stop was the TARDIS. Rose laid a reverent hand on the door of the battered time ship, and then rested her forehead against the cool wood. Then she lifted her key—still on a chain around her neck—and unlocked the door. She disappeared inside, and River turned to Donna. "D'you want to see it?" she asked.

Donna blinked. "What's a 'police box?'"

"It belonged to the Doctor," River replied. "Just go inside."

The ginger woman balked. "What for."

"Donna Noble," the other woman said in mock-irritation. "Just go!"

She stepped inside, and gasped. It was huge! Impossibly huge! She'd seen the outside, and there was no way that the cavernous room fit inside the little blue box! Not-Rose was standing next to what looked like the controls. One hand rested on a clear glass tube that stretched to the ceiling. Her eyes were closed, and she looked almost like she was listening. But that was daft, listening to what?

"She's happy to see you," the woman murmured.

"Sorry?" Donna asked.

Not-Rose opened her eyes. "The TARDIS is live. She's the last of her kind, just like he was the last of his. A sentient, dimensionally transcendent space-and-timeship." She glanced around at the jumble of wires that led from the console out into the warehouse. "Time and Relative Dimension in Space—that's what it stands for." A small smile curved her lips. "This room used to shine with light. And music! Anything you could want—Ian Dury, Operas from Venus, Symphonies from galaxies millions of miles away." She was looking past Donna, and the ginger woman felt like she was looking right through her, staring at a memory hundreds of years old. "He was a Time Lord—the last."

"If he was so special, what was he doing with me?" Donna asked hesitantly.

"He thought you were brilliant," River said as she strode into the dark room. She laid a hand on the tube next to Rose's, and the glass columns within moved sluggishly.

"Don't be stupid," Donna sniffed.

"If the Doctor brought you with him, than you were," not-Rose asserted quietly. "You just needed him to see it. He did that for me—for everyone he touches."

She looked at the blonde woman. "Were you and him—?"

Not-Rose's lips twisted into a bitter smile. "I was. Him, well, you never can tell."

"He was." River's voice was quiet, but sure. "And in the right timeline, you are. The two of you, it's like traveling with teenagers sometimes." One corner of her mouth tugged up into a crooked smile. "Made me jealous, you did, but you deserve it. After what the two of you have done for the universe, you deserve every minute of it." And then the smiled dropped, and she was serious again. "And we're going to make sure that happens." A flash caught her eye, a bit of black and shiny legs and pincers. She reached a hand out and drifted it over Donna's back. "Would you like to see it?" she asked the ginger woman.
Donna stared at her for a moment, fear rising into her throat like bile, and then she nodded.

Perhaps agreeing to look at the creature hadn't been such a good idea, she thought after River and Rose had managed to calm her down. She was sitting on a box—a make-shift chair—with a cup of tea whilst the other two women argued about something to do with the Time Vortex. It was gibberish to Donna. It was all madness—but she'd seen madness all around her, and they seemed to be sure that it would work, that she could fix whatever had gone wrong with the world.

And there was the fact that she had a giant bug on her back, and now that she'd seen it, she knew she couldn't ignore it. She couldn't go back to living her life, ignorant of the world around her. There was something wrong with the world, and not in the abstract way that philosophers and idealists believed. There was something concrete, something fixable, and she could do that. There was nothing for it. She had to try.

So she stood, and walked over to where the two of them were standing. "What do I need to do?" she asked in her most authoritative voice.

River smiled. "You're going to travel in time."

"I was able to use the TARDIS to track down the moment of intervention: Monday the 25th at one minute past ten in the morning. You probably don't even remember it—most ordinary day in in the world, but, by turning right when you were meant to turn left, you never met the Doctor and the whole world changed around you." River was pacing as she relayed the important information to Donna and not-Rose. "Your car was on Little Sutton street leading to the Ealing road. You turned right, but you were supposed to turn left. It's the most important thing—you've got to go back and turn left. Have you go that, Donna? One minute past ten you've got to make yourself turn left heading for the Chiswick high road."

"Keep the jacket on at all times," Captain Magambo instructed, motioning to the heavy, wire-covered trench coat that Donna wore. "It will insulate you against temporal feedback." She handed her a plain digital watch. "This will correspond to local time wherever you land."

They walked her to the edge of the circle, and River stopped her just outside. "I wanted to say thank you," she began. "I know this is terrifying, but I promise you, it's worth it. The Doctor is worth it. The life you have in the real timeline—it's worth it."

Donna laughed. "It has to be. I can't imagine anything worse than this." She glanced nervously at the mirrors that lined the circle. "I don't want to see that thing on my back."

"You won't," River assured her. "The mirrors are incidental—they bounce chronon energy back into the center which we control, and decide the destination."

Donna grinned. "It's a time machine."

River's answering grin was huge. "It's a time machine."

The ginger woman stepped into the middle of the circle. River turned to go, but Donna called her back. "I understand now," she told the curly-haired woman. "I understand what Mickey meant when he said I'm going to die. He meant this whole world is going to blink out of existence—but that's okay, because a better one takes its place—the Doctor's world!"
A hum built up as switches were toggled and buttons were pushed, and the time machine sprang into
live. In the midst of the controlled chaos, River Song was a stone as she looked solemnly back at
Donna Noble.

"That's right, isn't it?" the ginger woman asked, suddenly unsure. "That's what's going to happen."

"I'm sorry," River said. "I'm so sorry." And then the hum faltered, and she ran to the TARDIS. Not-Rose
followed her. There was something wrong. The machine should be accelerating, not slowing!
They weren't done yet, not even close! She grabbed the rubber mallet that hung where it always did,
just off the console, and slammed it on the controls, apparently at random. Besides causing a shower
of sparks, it had no effect. She swore.

"What is it?" Donna called nervously from the center of the mirrored circle. "What's going on?"

River gripped the edge of the console with enough force to turn her knuckles white. "Come on, old
girl," she begged. "Just a little more, please!" The Time Rotor wheezed a slow climb, but fell
halfway.

"What do you need?" not-Rose asked, her voice sharp. "Tell me, what is it that you need!"

"Power," River grated out. "She's been holding on since the Doctor died—but they're linked, and
she can't function properly without him. There was no-one around when he died to release the bio-
lock." The blonde woman blinked at her. "The Doctor's name, his true name. One of its functions is
as a release mechanism for the telepathic link he shares with the TARDIS. Normally when a Time
Lord is killed their TARDIS dies with them—makes it so no one can kill him to get to her." She
patted the controls soothingly. "She overrode the protocol—but it's taking most of her strength just to
stay alive. She doesn't have enough power to send Donna back."

Not-Rose straightened, and for the first time since she'd arrived in the broken timeline something of
the woman River knew seemed to come through. "Well, then," she said softly. "Give me a moment,
just a moment, and you'll have all the power you need. I can do power." Then she turned and strode
out of the TARDIS and into the circle where Donna stood. She held out her hand and smiled. "I just
wanted to say that it was brilliant to meet you, Donna Noble."

"You too," the ginger woman responded, and shook her hand. "Although River tells me I already
have."

"Do me a favor," not-Rose requested as she dropped Donna's hand. "When you see the Doctor, tell
him something from me. Tell him two words, just two. Tell him: 'Bad Wolf.'"

Donna flinched away from the blonde woman. An unearthly golden light seemed to suffuse her,
starting with her eyes that shone like supernovas, like stars and fire and planets burning. She looked
like a candle held behind quartz, like her skin was simply a shell for the light within. All movement
had ceased and all eyes were fixed on her as she turned and walked back into the TARDIS.

She placed her hands on the console and turned her face, eyes closed, up to the Time Rotor. "I want
you safe, my Doctor," she murmured in that strange, layered voice that heralded the appearance of
the Bad Wolf. Then the light became blinding, and River was forced to cover her eyes against it.
When it faded, the still, silent body of the alternate Rose Tyler lay crumpled at the base of the control
console. She was smiling.

River couldn't stop staring. It wasn't her Rose, wasn't the woman who was as close to her as her own
mother—perhaps closer, because River loved her parents, loved them more than almost anything, but
Rose knew things. She understood. And she was dead. She'd spent almost five centuries trying to get
back to the Doctor, and she was dead.

"I'm sorry," Alistair said softly and laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. River blinked. When had he entered the TARDIS? How long had she been standing there? "Were you close?"

She took a deep breath. There was still work to be done. "No, not really, not this Rose." And then she closed a door in her mind and turned to face him.

"What do we do now?" Captain Magambo wanted to know.

"Now, we wait for Donna Noble."

Donna wanted to jump for joy. She wanted to grab one of the people walking past her and pull them into a hug or a dance or something! She was back! It was Monday morning! It worked! Then she glanced down at the watch, and all the joy drained out of her. She had four minutes to find herself and convince past Donna to turn left, but she was in Sutton Court—half a mile away!

She began to run. It felt familiar, almost comforting. But she wasn't a runner, never had been. She hated running, but something about it made her feel safe. Maybe the Doctor liked running. Maybe it was bleeding through. So she ran, and she ran, but finally she had to stop. This body wasn't used to running. This Donna hadn't lived that life—and she wasn't going to make it.

She needed a way to make sure that past her would turn left. Mickey's words rang in her ears. You're gonna die. She looked up at the road. There was a truck coming. A strange sort of calm settled over her. It felt like the floor had dropped out beneath her, but her mind was clear. "Please," she said, and sent a prayer to whatever god might be listening. And then she stepped out into the road, in front of the truck.

Past Donna was sitting at the intersection in the car with her mother. "Oh, I know why you want to work at H.C. Clements," Sylvia Noble snapped. "It's 'cause you think you'll meet a man! We let me tell you something lady, posh executives only use temps for practice."

She thought about replying, about telling her mum to shove it, and then she sighed. "Yeah, you're probably right," and she flipped the blinker on to turn right. And then the cars heading that direction stopped. A goodly line built up, five or six at least.

"D'you think there's been an accident?" her mum asked.

Donna snorted. "I'm not waiting in that! That decides it—I'm going left." She turned her blinker back the way it originally was, and history was put back on course.

Donna Noble lay on the pavement. She wasn't in pain, which was strange, and she was pretty sure that it wasn't a good thing. She was tired, so, so tired, and darkness was gathering at the edges of her vision. Just as she closed her eyes, she remembered Rose's words.

Tell him 'Bad Wolf.'
Planets in the Sky

Chapter Notes

Nothing you recognize belongs to me! Some dialogue taken from 'The Stolen Earth.'

It had seemed innocent enough. They were on a planet called Shan Shen for their New Year's festival. The Doctor brought them there as a way to make up for what happened on Midnight. Donna thought that maybe he should just stop promising peaceful holidays, as they never seemed to turn out the way he planned. A fortune teller spotted Donna, and offered to tell her the future.

Donna had seen the future, and she was a little too old for stories about a rich husband and many children, but the woman insisted. Finally, after she offered to do the reading for free, Donna gave in. The tent was dark and smelled strongly of incense. She held out her hand for the woman to read her palm, and that's when things turned strange. The fortune teller seemed more concerned with the past than the future. She asked Donna over and over again why she ended up with the life she had, what choices led her to travel with the Doctor.

And then she felt something crawl on her back, and she was sucked into a nightmare.

As she lay on the pavement and the world faded into blackness around her, she realized that her eyes were closed. When she opened them she screamed. She was back on Shan Shen, in the musty tent facing the diminutive fortune teller. The sharp claws that dug into her jacket fell away as her choice was unmade and history continued on its proper path.

The woman cowered in front of her. "You are so strong!" she whispered harshly, fear making her tremble. "What are you?" And then she turned and ran. Donna stood there for a moment, breathing heavily. Her heart was pounding and her whole body felt weak.

The Doctor poked his head through the beaded curtain that served as a door. "Donna?" he called. "Everything all right?" He stepped into the tent and glanced around. Rose followed him, her hand in his as always.

"Oh god," she murmured, and then launched herself at them.

They were a bit surprised, but when she grabbed them into a hug they obliged her. "What's all this about, then?" Rose asked, amused. "We haven't been gone that long."

Donna shrugged. "I dunno, feels like I haven't seen you in years." She wiped her eyes. The Doctor looked past her, and his gaze fell on the huge black insect that lay on the floor. He released Rose and Donna and picked it up.

The ginger woman gasped. "That thing! There was this woman, and she held my hand, and she made it crawl up on my back!"

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. "And you managed to break out of its spell?"

Rose made a face as she peered at it. Bugs she could handle. Huge bugs? Definitely not her favorite. "What is it?"
"It's part of the Trickster's brigade. As Sarah Jane about him the next time we see her," he said absently. "She's had a few run-ins with him. But this—it changes a life in tiny little ways. Most times the universe just compensates around it, but not you." He flashed her a grin. "You make a choice and get pushed into an alternate timeline."

Donna blinked. "She said that."

"Who?" Rose asked.

Donna frowned. "I'm trying to remember. It's like—you know when you try and remember a dream, and it just goes?" They nodded. "There was this woman and she was familiar, so familiar." She frowned, thinking hard, and then she gasped. "Oh! It was your friend—Professor Song! She was there, and, and you were there too!" She pointed at Rose. "But it wasn't you. It was like a copy, one possibility. And you told me something, something I had to tell the Doctor."

He straightened, the playfulness suddenly gone from his manner. "What, Donna? What did the other Rose say?"

Her eyes were far away, turned inward. "She said it was two words. She said—Bad Wolf."

Whatever reaction she'd expected from the Doctor, she wasn't prepared for what happened. He froze, completely froze, in the way that only he could do. He didn't even appear to be breathing, and when she met his eyes the fear in them hit her like a punch in the stomach. Then his gaze cut over to Rose, who had a hand over her mouth.

"That's impossible," he said softly, his voice low and rough. "Bad Wolf is gone." But River's voice echoed in his head. She doesn't go around calling herself 'Rose Tyler.' No, she tells everyone she's the 'Bad Wolf.'

"But, what is the Bad Wolf?" Donna asked, clearly confused. The Doctor ignored her. Instead he took off running towards the TARDIS. Rose and Donna followed him, and nearly ran straight into him when they exited the tent. He was standing just outside, staring. A major component of Shan Shen's New Year's celebration was banners. Every available surface was plastered with paper and cloth prayers for luck, for money, for a good harvest, and a million other requests.

At least, that's what they had been for. Every banner now proclaimed only two words repeated over and over again: 'Bad Wolf.'

Inside the TARDIS, the Doctor took them spinning into the Vortex. "I need to know what happened, Donna," he insisted. They were sitting in the kitchen. Rose was at the stove, fixing them tea. No one really wanted a cuppa, but it helped her to think, to clear her head. The familiar rituals grounded her in the moment and kept her in control of her thoughts, which were threatening to spill over and run wildly about her head.

The ginger woman shrugged. "I can't remember much. There was River and this other bloke." She frowned. "Rickey, or—"

"Mickey," Rose interrupted as she brought three steaming mugs of tea over. "Mickey Smith."

Donna nodded. "That's it." She took the offered mug and sipped reflexively. "Thanks. And he said—he said 'the stars are going out.' He said 'the darkness is coming.'"

The Doctor shook his head. "But that world's gone."

"He said it was all worlds," Donna told him. "Every single universe. He said they needed you, that
Earth needs you."

The Doctor stood and left his mug on the table. "Well then, let's go to Earth."

Donna let him leave the room. She laid a hand on Rose's arm. The other woman was shaking. "What's wrong?" she asked softly.

Rose worried her bottom lip with her teeth. "It's just—Mickey's dead. I killed him. He took the first model of the Dimension Cannon, back when the stars were going out in Pete's World—but he never came back, and the stars did and then the Cannon stopped working. He must have died, and now I'm gonna have to watch it."

Maybe the Doctor's flying had improved, or maybe the TARDIS realized that none of her passengers were really in the mood to be tossed about like ragdolls, or maybe they were so distracted that they didn't really notice, but for whatever reason the landing seemed softer than usual. The Doctor wrenched the door open and bolted out of the TARDIS—onto an average street. There were a few cars on the road and the sky was overcast, but otherwise it appeared to be an ordinary day.

"It's fine," he murmured as he cast his gaze about, looking for something, anything, that hinted at trouble. "Excuse me!" he hailed a milkman, who was unloading glass bottles from his truck. "What day is it?"

"Saturday!" the man shouted back.

"That's good," the Doctor told them. "I like Saturdays." He continued to look around them, and unconsciously one hand came up to clutch at his hair. "Why would she say that—'Bad Wolf'?" Then he turned around and ran back into the TARDIS. "Scans, I need to do some scans! Because if Mickey the-not-much-of-an-idiot-anymore can get through from Pete's World to your failed timeline than the walls of the universe are dissolving."

"And that's bad?" Donna asked from the door. Rose followed her in and shut it.

"Oh, definitely! Great, big, heaping pile of bad, that is! All the universes collide and fall into the Void, bad!" He paused in his manic dance around the console. "But how? The Time Lords could have done it, but they're gone, and the Eternals have been silent since the war." He smacked himself on the forehead. "Think!" He paced for a few moments, and then bounded over to Rose. "Have you been feeling—different, at all? Strange dreams, knowing things you can't possibly know, perhaps glowing?"

She stared at him. "If I had, you'd already know about it!"

He had just pulled out the sonic screwdriver, probably to give her a good scan, when the TARDIS lurched. Donna shrieked as she clung to the console. The Doctor wrapped one arm around Rose's waist and grabbed the railing with the other, bracing himself against the ship as it rocked and shook.

"Oi!" their ginger companion yelled. "What do you think you're doing, spaceman?"

"I'm not doing anything!" he replied "I'm all the way over here! If anything, you're doing something!"

"Am not!" she snapped back. And then the ship shuddered and was still.

"What the hell was that?" Rose asked, still clinging to the Doctor.
"Dunno," he told her, "but it came from outside." She staggered a bit as he released her and pushed himself towards the door. Donna remained at the console, still holding firmly to the edge. The Doctor threw open the TARDIS doors—and stared into space. There was nothing, just drifting rocks and Mercury and Venus in the distances. Rose joined him at the doors, frowning.

"But—we're in space," she said. "How did that happen?" As quickly as he'd come, he left, dashing back to the console and the monitor. He slipped on his glasses, and stopped. That couldn't be right! That was impossible!

Donna caught his puzzled expression. "Doctor?" she asked. "Where did we go?"

He glanced up. "Go? We didn't go anywhere. The TARDIS is fixed."

"Well, we had to have gone somewhere," the woman said. "We're not on Earth anymore!"

He took the glasses off and placed them carefully back in his pocket. "Well, that's not exactly true. It's more like—like the Earth isn't under us anymore."

"How is that any different from what Donna said?" Rose wanted to know.

"Donna implied that we moved," the Doctor responded slowly. "But we're at the same galactic coordinates as we were earlier, which means that it was the Earth that moved."

Martha Jones was just getting her life back together when everything went to hell in a hand-basket. She was in Manhattan, a move that had come with a promotion, and honestly she knew she could do with a change. England reminded her a little too much of Tom and the train wreck that had been their relationship. For a while it had been wonderful. He was brilliant and compassionate and sturdy, but his first duty wasn't to her. Of course, if she was honest—and she was into honesty these days—hers wasn't to him. Beyond each other, they had responsibilities to the world and to their work. Maybe if she was just a doctor, if they worked for the same hospital or advocacy group, maybe they could have worked everything out.

But they didn't. So they held to each other even as their chosen paths pulled them further and further apart—until they broke.

She was moving past that. She really was. She didn't wear the ring anymore, not even around her neck, and she was starting to get used to sleeping alone (although she should have had no problem—they were hardly in the same place even when they were together), and her flat didn't feel so empty without his shoes next to the door and his coat thrown across the back of the couch.

And then the world shook and everything changed. She was at work when it happened. One minute she was talking to Liza about the upcoming budget meeting, and the next she was opening her eyes to the sound of alarms and the hard carpet of the floor pressed against her face. She must have passed out for a bit. From the state of things around her it could only have been a few minutes. She ran a quick mental inventory—no broken bones, although she had some nasty bruising, and no sign of concussion either. Good. She would need her wits about her.

"What was that?" she asked as she pushed herself up off the ground. "Some kind of earthquake?" Furniture was tipped over and papers were scattered across the floor. They were on emergency power. "Is anyone hurt?" she called.

Suzanne made her way over to the window. She raised the blinds to get a look at the situation outside and gasped. "Martha!" she yelled. "Martha—look at the sky!"
Something in her coworker's tone told Martha Jones that whatever had happened outside their walls, she needed to see it. She picked her way through the piles of furniture and technology to join Suzanne at the window. What she saw made her gasp. "That's impossible," she murmured.

Life had been relatively quiet for the four surviving members of Torchwood Three. Relatively being the operative word, of course. They were short a tech expert and a medic, but it wasn't the prospect of having to go to hospital that contributed to the slightly morose atmosphere of the hub, nor was it the extra work that each member had to shoulder in light of the reduced size of the team. Tosh and Owen were their friends—and they were dead.

It wasn't fair, Gwen thought. There had been so much possibility—Tosh had confided to her that Owen asked her on a date. The shy young woman had loved him for just about ever, but he'd never given her a second glance, until he died and Jack brought him back with the glove. Sex had been off the table, then, and while he'd been miserable for a while, he was finally starting to do more than feel sorry for himself. And then he was trapped in a room that was flooded with radiation and his body decayed, and Tosh was shot by Jack's insane brother.

She was sitting at her desk, lost in thought when the world shifted around her. The tremors threw her back out of her chair and onto the cold cement floor of the hub. Jack was on his feet and out of his office in an instant.

"What happened?" he called. "Was it the Rift? Gwen, Ianto, are you okay?"

"No broken bones," the young Welshman responded, rubbing his head where he'd knocked it on the table. "Slight loss of dignity—no change, then."

"The whole city must have felt that!" Gwen exclaimed as she clambered to her feet. "The whole of South Wales!"

Ianto pulled himself up with the help of the computer table and toggled the monitor to display the outer security cameras. "Bit bigger than Wales," he commented dryly.

"That's impossible!" Gwen replied.

Jack looked grim. "We need to find the Doctor."

"You don't mean," Ianto trailed off, eyes wide.

"Yes, I do." Jack pulled out his phone. "Looks like you two are going to meet the reason Torchwood was founded."

Sarah Jane Smith shoved the stack of papers that had taken up residence on her stomach to the floor and stood. She'd been reorganizing her case files when the quake hit. Of course, there was a bit of reminiscing, but that was impossible to avoid. She'd worked her way up to the school where she'd met the Doctor, Rose, and Mickey and had to take a moment.

It was the day she decided to live her own life, to move past the anger and faded hope that had defined her, and start anew. It was the day she let go of the past and embraced the present. It had been hard, seeing the Doctor with someone new, knowing that he felt something for Rose that he never had for her, despite the deep affection that he obviously still possessed. But it was good, too. He shouldn't be alone. He should find someone who could make him happy. Sarah Jane wished that
the universe wasn't so cruel, sometimes, because as soon as he realized what he had—it was gone.

She read the paper regularly. She was, after all, a journalist, and when she saw four words among the list of the dead—*Rose Marian Tyler, deceased*—her heart broke for him. She had a fantastic life, a son (and who would have thought?) who was brilliant and following in her investigative footsteps, and she wished the same for the Doctor.

"Luke?" Sarah called and started towards the door. "Are you all right?" He was on the floor next to the door. She pulled him up and ran her hands over his face and arms, checking for injury.

"Felt like some sort of cross-dimensional spatial transferrance," he told her. She ignored him in favor of continuing her search for injuries. He sighed. "I'm fine, Mum, I promise."

Satisfied, she nodded sharply. "Yes, yes you are." She glanced out the window, and paused. "But—it's night. It wasn't night. It was eight o'clock in the morning!" She turned to the wall. "Mr. Smith, I need you!" A musical trill filled the room as what appeared to be a solid wall shifted, and revealed a complicated-looking supercomputer. Sarah Jane rolled her eyes. "I wish you would stop giving me that fanfare and just tell me what happened!"

"Sarah Jane," the computer, Mr. Smith, said. "I think you should look outside. I think you will find the visual evidence most conclusive.

In Chiswick, Wilfred Mott stood in the street clutching a cricket bat. "It's gone dark," he told his daughter, Sylvia, who was standing on the front step of their house. He scanned the area. "It's them aliens, I'll bet my pension!"

Sylvia moved slowly to stand next to him, but she wasn't looking at the neighbor's house or down the street. She wasn't looking at the ground at all. "Look, dad," she choked. "Look at the sky!"

Wilf looked up, and cried out. Instead of the familiar sight of the sun, or even the stars, he was greeted with the sight of unfamiliar planets hanging close above them.

Lightning without thunder flashed in an alley just outside of Chiswick. When it cleared, three people were standing where there had been no-one before. Mickey and River both had filled holsters strapped to their sides, but Jenny remained unarmed. A warm breeze ruffled River's curly hair, and she looked up at the sky above them.

"Right," she said briskly, tossing a smile at her companions. "Now we're in trouble."
Nothing you recognize belongs to me! Some dialogue taken from 'Journey's End.'

Donna stared at the Doctor. "But—if the Earth's moved then they've lost the sun!" she exclaimed, and then turned pale. "What about my mum and granddad? What about Martha and everyone? Are they dead?"

The Doctor leaned over the console, typing furiously, staring at the monitor. He seemed to be ignoring her. Rose laid a comforting hand on the ginger woman's arm. "We'll figure it out, Donna." Her voice was soothing and certain. She gave the other woman a crooked smile. "We always do."

"That's my family," Donna continued numbly. "My whole world."

The Doctor tapped a few more keys and then whirled away from the monitor angrily. He said something low and harsh that the TARDIS refused to translate. "There's no readings." He bit off the words like they were painful. "Nothing. Nothing at all. Not a trace, not even a whisper." He ran a hand through his hair and tugged on the brown strands. "Oh, that is fearsome technology."

Rose, ever practical, brought him back to the present. "So what do we do?"

"We've got to get help." He hesitated for a moment, and then nodded sharply. "I'm taking us to the Shadow Proclamation."

She blinked. "Like, that thing you've been quoting every time we run into an alien invasion? That Shadow Proclamation."

"Yep. Hold tight!" He moved around the console, a maelstrom of tightly controlled energy bordering on frenzy. He was worried. There was a desperation to his movements, and he wasn't the sort to go for help, not help like this. The Doctor hated working with large, impersonal organizations. UNIT he tolerated because he had almost free reign, thanks to his history of saving the world. Too many other government-style institutions were only interested in using him for their own ends—ends which never seemed to quite match up with his.

"Well, what are they!" Donna exclaimed as the TARDIS tipped and bucked.

"Police!" he called as he flipped switches and pulled levers. "It's a posh name for outer-space police!"

They landed with a thump and the Doctor darted to the door. As was her custom, Rose held up his coat as he shrugged into it. He remembered with a pang the number of times he'd gotten tangled in the sleeves during her absence, waiting for a pair of hands and a warm smile that never came. Enough gloomy thoughts—she was here, and they had a puzzle in front of them.

The Judoon were waiting when the three of them stepped out of the TARDIS. After a brief exchange that the TARDIS failed to translate they were ushered in to see one of the Shadow
Proclamation's investigators. She was humanoid, but here hair was white and her eyes blood red. She wore a long black dress—apparently a uniform of sorts—and a skeptical expression.

"Time Lords," she told them, "are myths. They belong in the legends and whisperings of the higher species." She raked her eyes over them, and apparently found them wanting. "You cannot possibly exist."

Rose rolled her eyes. If she had a pound for every time an alien told her the Doctor was a myth she'd be richer than Victoria Beckham. The Doctor ignored the woman's disbelief. He tucked his hands into the pockets of his coat and rocked on the balls of his feet impatiently. "More to the point," he told her briskly. "I've got a missing planet."

She sniffed. "Apparently you are not as wise as the legends tell. The picture, Doctor, is far bigger than that. Twenty-four worlds have been taken."

He frowned and bounded over to stand next to the investigator, behind a computer terminal. "How many? Show me!" He reached into his suit jacket pocket, pulled out his brainy specs, and slipped them on.

The investigator obligingly called up names and statistics for all the planets taken. Rose and Donna remained opposite the Doctor, next to one of the Judoon guards. He might be an alien genius and thus potentially helpful, but Rose wasn't sure how lenient the Judoon would be with her. The Doctor ran a hand through his hair as he studied the screen. "Shallakatop, Jahoo, Callifrax Minor, Woman Wept—Clom—wait, Clom's gone? Who'd want Clom?"

She shrugged. "Locations range far and wide—some populated, some not, but all unconnected except that they disappeared at precisely the same moment and left no trace."

Donna blinked. "What about Pyrovillia?" she asked.

The Judoon guard stepped forward. "Pyrovillia is cold case, not relevant."

"Yeah, but when we were in Pompeii," Donna continued, "Lucius, he said that it was gone."

Rose nodded. "And then there was the Adipose breeding planet, remember? Ms. Foster said that it was lost too, but that had to have been a long time ago."

The Doctor grinned. "Brilliant!" he exclaimed. "Planets are being taken out of time as well as space!"

The inspector's mouth twitched into a sneer. "Who are the females?" she asked snidely.

Rose hid a smile as Donna's face fell into familiar, belligerent lines. "I'm Donna, and this is Rose, and we're human beings, maybe not 'legends,' but every bit as important as Time Lords, thanks." The inspector sniffed, but didn't reply. The Doctor glanced at Rose, a small, proud smile curving his lips.

"Let's put this into 3D," he told them and began typing furiously. "I always think better when I can see what's going on." Planets popped into existence, clever holograms with a blue tinge. He added Donna and Rose's suggestions, but something seemed to be missing. "Aha!" he yelled triumphantly. "The Lost Moon of Poosh!" Another burst of typing, and then the planets rearranged. Originally their positions had been rather slap-dash, more a function of what had come first, but the new arrangement seemed finely balanced, like a chemist's scale. The Doctor strode through the display, grinning.

"What did you do?" the investigator demanded.
"Nothing," he replied casually. "The planets rearranged themselves into the optimum pattern." He watched the Lost Moon of Poosh cycle around with a goofy smile on his face—the kind usually reserved for when humans did something pleasantly surprising. "Isn't that beautiful?"

"Oi!" Donna was having none of it. "Don't go all spaceman, spaceman. What does it mean?"

The Doctor meandered over to where she and Rose were still standing. "All of these planets are in perfect balance. They fit together like pieces in an engine—a solar-system size powerhouse. The amount of energy you could generate with that set up is immense."

Rose frowned. "But what for? Why would you need so much power?"

"More than that," the inspector broke in. "Who could design such a thing?"

The Doctor had gone still. "Someone tried to move the Earth once before," he murmured. "A long time ago." His eyes were distant, haunted. Then he shook himself. "Can't be. And anyway, that's the question of the hour—well, one of them. Who, how, where, and why?"

Something was moving towards the Earth. In the center of the mass of planets, something that wasn't organic hovered like an artificial sun. "UNIT is declaring a code red," Martha's C.O. announced brusquely as he strode into the command center. "Everyone to wartime positions!" He glanced at her. "If you're not too busy, Dr. Jones?"

She snapped her phone closed. "I've been trying to call the Doctor, sir, but there's no signal." She tapped the mobile against her chin thoughtfully. "That phones picks up anywhere, anywhen. It never loses signal. They must be blocking it, whoever 'they' are."

He smiled grimly. "We're about to find out. They're coming into orbit now."

Lee strode into the hub. He'd called in sick—these 21st century viruses were wreaking havoc on his immune system—but his ridiculous cold would have to wait. And really, the state of medicine in his new home was awful. People still died from AIDS, for crying out loud, and the life expectancy of the average individual was just about 80 years. His grandfather had been 125 when he died, and his grandmother had lived to 131.

"Glad you could make it," Jack tossed out as he hopped from computer to computer. He was running scans, Lee noted, searching for some kind of energy signature, but apparently he wasn't finding it.

"Lee," Gwen said with a smile. Ianto only nodded. He had his eyes fixed to the computer on the far left, apparently checking the Rift for any signs of change.

"I've got nothing, Jack," the Welshman announced. He sounded tired and frustrated. "On the plus side, whoever put us here has an artificial atmospheric shell in place, keeping in the air and holding in the heat."

"Gwen," Lee acknowledged, and then turned to study Ianto's screen. "But that's good, isn't it?" he asked. "Whoever moved the Earth wants humanity alive." It had been odd, learning what passed for English three thousand years before he was born, but Lee found that the unfamiliar sounds helped his stutter. He hardly ever tripped over words, unless he was particularly excited.

Jack said nothing, but his expression conveyed significant doubt.
"The ships have hit three-thousand miles and closing," Gwen called from her station. "But who are they?"

Jack's phone rang. He answered it with the barest hint of a smile. "Martha Jones, voice of a nightingale." And then his tone hardened. "Tell me you put something in my drink."

"No luck there, I'm afraid," Martha replied. "Have you heard from the Doctor?"

Jack's lips were a thin slash across his face. "Not a word. Where are you?"

There was a dull roar in the background, the sound of indistinct voices chattering behind her. "New York," she replied. "I've been promoted—Medical Director in charge of project Indigo."

Jack raised an eyebrow. "Get that thing working yet?"

"Indigo is top secret!" she protested.

Another ghost of a smile. "Strictly business," he mouthed, and squeezed the Welshman's hand.

"Fifteen hundred miles, boys," Gwen interrupted. "And accelerating. They're almost here."

There was chaos on the streets. River, Mickey, and Jenny moved confidently through the crush of looters and revelers. Their weapons were displayed obviously, and their cool assurance was enough to give even drunks pause. They radiated controlled violence. Even Jenny, who was unarmed (but never helpless) warranted a bit of space. It was as if they were surrounded by an invisible force field. Anyone who came too close received a look coupled with a suggestive gesture toward Mickey and River's holstered guns, and the offender quickly cleared off.

They ended up in a computer shop. There were looters, but Mickey chased them off. "Like my gun, mate?" he asked almost jovially. "You've got a choice, you can load up the goods, or you can run for your life." They ran. Jenny thought that maybe they were cleverer than they looked.

"We need information," River told them. "Mickey, do you think you could hack into UNIT from here?"

Mickey scratched his head, and then grinned. "Might not have to hack." River raised an eyebrow. "Few years back the Doctor had me get into UNIT so I could destroy ten Downing street. I remember the password."

River's smile was wolfish. "Then get to it! Jenny and I will watch your back."

At thirteen Bannerman road, Sarah Jane Smith and her son Luke watched Mr. Smith track a fleet of spaceships towards Earth. "I am receiving a transmission from the Earthbound ships, Sarah Jane," the supercomputer informed her. "They have a message for the human race."

Sarah Jane regarded the computer warily. "Put it through," she instructed. There was a sharp edge to her voice. "Let's hear it." She was tense, tense like Luke had seldom seen her.
"Exterminate!" Mr. Smith's speakers blared. "Exterminate! Exterminate!"

She gasped, and her son noticed with a shock that she was shaking. She brought her hand to her mouth, which remained open and her eyes were wide. Tears gathered there and threatened to spill over and onto her cheeks.

"Mum?" he asked hesitantly. "Mum? What is it?"

She turned to face him, and then hugged him fiercely. "You're so young!" she whispered as she clung to him. He raised his arms and hugged her back awkwardly. "You're too young!"

Jack was about to say something rather witty to lighten the tone of his conversation with Martha, which had taken a decidedly dark turn, when the speakers of the hub activated. "Exterminate! Exterminate! Exterminate!" echoed against the cement and steel walls. Lee turned pale. Jack's mouth fell open in horror and he pulled Gwen and Ianto to him.

"Jack?" the Welsh woman asked, her voice higher than usual. "Jack, what is it?"

Ianto recognized the harsh, mechanical voice, and all of a sudden he was back in Canary Wharf, trapped between Cybermen and Daleks, trying frantically to find Lisa.

"I'm sorry," Jack said dully, "but there's nothing I can do." He pressed a quick kiss to both of their foreheads. "We're dead."

Mickey swore and hit the side of the computer.

"What happened?" River asked, glancing back from her position close to the broken storefront.

"I don't know," he replied waspishly. "It just sort of froze up, like something was overriding it." A window popped up and the Dalek's cry poured out from the computer's speakers, harsh and tinny. "Shit!" he snapped.

River looked grim, but she put a hand on Jenny's arm. "We need to find your father. He's right clever, and your mum eats Daleks for breakfast." She clicked the safety off of her gun. "But we can't stay here; we're too exposed. We need to find somewhere with more cover."

Martha almost dropped her phone. Daleks, oh god, daleks. There wasn't time, they needed more time! The weapons they had on hand wouldn't be enough. Not even a solar flare could damage Dalekanium, the primary component of Dalek battle armor. Bullets wouldn't even scratch the surface.

"Battle stations!" her C.O. bellowed over the panicked chatter of her coworkers and the blaring alarms. "UNIT is declaring Code Red Dalek!" he snapped. "We are at war!" He turned to face her. "Doctor Jones, you're with me, quick march!"

And then the world exploded. The building shook and she could hear more detonations from outside. As soon as she could get her feet under her, Martha was at the window. Saucer-like ships dipped and wove through the Manhattan skyline. Energy pulses destroyed buildings and roads. They seemed to be firing indiscriminately.
"Doctor Jones!" her C.O. yelled. "I said 'with me!"

"Yes sir!" she replied, and followed him out of the room and down one of the long, white hallways.

"Martha!" Jack's voice barked over her mobile. "You need to get out of there! The Daleks are targeting military bases, and you're next! They've taken out the Valiant and the airforce over South-Africa."

"I can't, Jack!" she said, as quietly as she could. "I've got a job to do!" Her C.O. stopped in front of a familiar storage locker and pulled out project Indigo. It looked like a backpack, except it had far too many wires covering the straps, and a digital display full of oscillating numbers.

"Put it on," the man instructed.

"But sir," she protested, "Indigo isn't ready. We haven't tested it yet."

"Don't do it!" Jack begged. "Martha, it's not safe!"

"You are our best hope to get in contact with the Doctor, Dr. Jones," her C.O. stated calmly. "But barring that, by the authority vested in me by the United Nations, I authorize you to take the Osterhagen key. Now, put it on! You take orders from UNIT, not Torchwood."

Martha obediently slipped project Indigo over her shoulders, but did not take the small disk the man held out to her. "I can't, sir," she whispered.

"You must," he told her, and pressed it into her hands. "Now go!"

"Martha!" Jack cried.

She took a deep breath, and pulled on two strings that dangled from the shoulder straps. "Bye, Jack." Then she was gone.

Jack threw his phone across the room and slammed his fist into the wall. Ianto and Gwen watched with wide eyes. Lee was too busy staring at the screen. Daleks. They'd been the deadliest threat the Universe had ever seen—until they vanished. According to the legends, they went off to fight the Time War against the Time Lords, but those were only legends. And now they were back.

"Where's Martha?" Gwen demanded. "What's project Indigo? What happened?"

"It's experimental teleport technology scavenged from the Sontarans," Jack explained. He sounded exhausted. "But they don't have coordinates or stabilization."

Lee's eyes widened. "But—but that's—"

"That's what?" Ianto asked. "Where is Martha?"

"Dead." Jack's voice was flat. "Scattered into atoms. She's gone."

They were taking people. Wilf and Sylvia hid in the shadows, watching. It wasn't every street, it wasn't their street, but Wilf refused to return home. "I've got a weapon," he told his daughter.

"It's a paint gun!" she replied, exasperated.
He grinned. "Aye, but them Daleks only have one eye. A good spot of paint and they'll be blinded, eh?"

Most of the people went meekly, stood where they were told, held their hands atop their head. He couldn't blame them, not really. He'd known about aliens. He'd been ready. Wilf imagined that if it was all new to him it would be more than overwhelming. And he'd been in the war. He'd been a soldier, and even though those days were long behind him, his first impulse was still to protect, to defend with whatever means he had available.

There were some who resisted, but the price of defiance was high. Four Daleks converged on a home and on the three individuals who refused to leave—and then they burned the house down.

"They're monsters," Wilf growled.

Sylvia was crying. "Please Dad," she begged. "Please come home!"

They ducked back into the alley and around the corner. There was a Dalek waiting for them. "Halt!" it ordered. "You will come with me."

"Will I, eh?" Wilf asked, and lifted his gun. His aim was good, and a thick coat of paint covered the Dalek's eyestalk. For a moment it looked like they were safe, and then the paint began to bubble. In the space of a moment it had dried, crumbled, and fallen off.

"My vision is not impaired," the Dalek informed them, and if it was capable of emotions it would have been smug. "Exterminate! Exterminate!" It moved its weapon, and then exploded. Wilf and Sylvia covered their eyes against the harsh glare of whatever had felled the creature.

River slid her gun back into its holster and started forward. Mickey and Jenny followed her. Wilf grinned and held up his paint gun. "Want to trade?" he asked.

River blinked. "You're Donna Noble's family."

Sylvia stiffened. "How do you know Donna?" she demanded.

"I travel with the Doctor," the other woman replied. "And right now we need you."

Wilf handed River his phone. "I've tried calling her, but there's no signal." He frowned. "And she said that Doctor bloke had fixed her phone up so she could call anywhere." Sylvia was in the kitchen, puttering around and probably trying to forget what was happening. River had seen her kind before—she was afraid of what was happening. Wilf had been her kind before—she was afraid of what was going on around her and didn't understand it, so she tried her hardest to ignore it. Like pretending something didn't happen ever made it stop. Donna had talked about how small her life used to be, how isolated she'd been, and River was starting to see why. If her mother had been as close-minded as Donna's, she probably would have blocked out the rest of the universe too! "The last time she called," Wilf went on, "she was on a planet called Midnight, made out of diamonds!"

"What are you on about?" Sylvia had returned, bearing mugs of tea for all of them. Mickey and Jenny took one with murmured thanks. She held a mug out to Wilf, but he ignored it.

"She's out there traveling the stars with that Doctor and Rose," he told his daughter. "And she always has been. Your daughter! And she's saved planets and lives and seen things that you can't even imagine."
Sylvia frowned. "Don't be ridiculous," she scoffed.

"Open your eyes!" Wilf replied. "Look at the sky—look at the Daleks! You can't start denying things now!"

River snapped the phone closed and sighed. She rubbed her eyes and Jenny suddenly noticed how tired she looked. "I'm out of ideas," she admitted. "The Daleks are blocking the signal somehow, and I don't have access to the tools I need to boost your phone." She started to pace. "Where is he?" she growled.

"He'll get here," Jenny told her. "I know he will. He remembers being here."

"But he didn't tell you when?" River wanted to know. Jenny shook her head. The curly-haired woman sighed. "Of course not. Spoilers."

For a moment Donna thought he'd solved it. She'd mentioned off-hand that the bees were disappearing and the Doctor had taken her idea and run with it. She was a bit disconcerted to discover that most of the migrant bees were in fact aliens from the planet Melissa Majoria, but she was willing to overlook that small fact as long as the Tandocca wavelengths could lead the TARDIS to wherever Earth was.

They arrived at the Medusa Cascade and the trail stopped dead. The Earth was nowhere to be seen. What was worse, the Doctor appeared to have given up. He stood back from the console, leaning against one of the coral support struts. His face had the same frighteningly closed-off expression she remembered from the secret basement beneath the Thames.

"You can't give up!" she cried. "You never give up!" He was silent.

Rose stood off to the side as Donna railed at him. She felt—strange, like she had an itch in her brain. The TARDIS's song hummed through her as it always did. It anchored her in the knowledge that this universe was where she belonged. When she woke from a nightmare alone in the Doctor's bed she could reach out for the song and it would wrap her in layers of warm affection and reassurance. But there was something different about it. She felt like there was something important, something she'd forgotten. If only she could remember what it was!

Lee sat on the floor, his back against the cold cement wall of the hub. Gwen was curled on the couch, Jack sat on the steps, and Ianto stood next to the coffee machine. His hands gripped the counter and his knuckles were white. "This is the Commander General of the United Nations calling the Dalek fleet," a voice crackled over the radio. "We surrender. I repeat, we surrender. Planet Earth surrenders."

A tinkling crash obscured the rest of the broadcast. They jerked their heads around to stare at Ianto, who was kneeling on the ground next to the remains of two mugs. His hands were shaking as he picked up ceramic shards. "Sorry," he murmured.

"We should be out there," Gwen said, her voice low and intense. "We should be doing something!"

"It's Daleks," Lee reminded her, as if that settled everything.

"You'd be dead in a heartbeat." Jack's voice was dull, hopeless. "I've fought them before."
"You lived," the Welsh woman pointed out.

He laughed harshly. "No, Gwen, I died. And then Rose brought me back to life." He regarded her steadily. "Did you ever wonder why I can't die?" Of course she did. They all did, but he'd never said, only tossed off a remark about finding 'the right kind of doctor,' whatever that meant.

Lee leaned forward. "Look at the monitor."

Static filled the main computer screen. Gwen could just vaguely make out the shape of someone sitting. "Hello?" a slightly distorted voice asked over the hub's speakers. "Can anyone hear me? The subwave network is activated—you should be able to hear my voice."

"Who is it?" Ianto asked.

"The whole world is screaming." Jack turned away. "Leave it."

"Captain Jack Harkness shame on you," the voice snapped. "Now stand to attention, sir."

Ianto looked up. Jack stood and bounded over to stand behind Gwen. "What?" Slowly the image cleared, and revealed an older woman sitting behind a computer desk. Her brown hair was pulled back from her face and she was wearing a simple gray jumper.

The woman held up her identification. "Harriet Jones, former Prime Minister."

A slow smile spread across his face. "Yeah," he said. "I know who you are."

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River, Mickey, and Jenny huddled around a laptop in a house in Chiswick as Harriet Jones unveiled her plan. "Oh, that's brilliant!" Mickey exclaimed when she explained how she had developed the subwave network, a sentient piece of software that was designed to seek out anyone who'd be able to help contact the Doctor. Apparently it found Torchwood, Sarah Jane, and a young black woman he didn't recognize, but Harriet introduced her as Martha Jones, former companion to the Doctor. "If only we had a webcam," he said, frustrated. "They need to know about the darkness—maybe that could help them find the Doctor."

Apparently they were fine on their own. Martha had the Doctor's phone number, but no one could get through. Jack came up with the idea to use the Torchwood hub as a giant transmitter powered by the Rift, a source of almost infinite energy. Sarah Jane and her son Luke had a computer that could hack into all of the world's phone services and make every single phone dial the same number, and Harriet Jones would continue to use the subwave network to mask their transmissions from the Daleks overhead.

"She's offering her life to get the Doctor here," River said quietly. "Let's make sure that her sacrifice isn't in vain."

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Something was ringing. Rose blinked. Donna was shouting something at the Doctor, who stared ahead blankly. He had retreated in on himself, fleeing to somewhere deep inside his mind. He did that sometimes, when the world became too much, or when he was feeling especially guilty. But there was a phone ringing, and she was apparently the only one who heard. This was significant. They'd tried calling Donna and Sarah Jane and even Jack, and gotten nothing—no response.

Rose grabbed Martha's old superphone off of the console and flipped it open. "Hello?" she answered
breathlessly. The phone beeped at her. Three beeps repeated constantly. She whirled around and thrust the phone in the Doctor's face. "I think it's for you!" she said, grinning.

He took it and held it to his ear. The morose expression fell from his face. His eyes brightened and his lips turned up at the corner. "A signal!"

"Can you follow it?" Donna demanded.

He winked at her. "Oh yes!" Then he pulled out his stethoscope and set the cold metal cap against the phone's speaker. He rattled off a string of numbers and rose typed them into the navigational controls. The Doctor shouted instructions, push that button, pull this lever, to Rose and Donna, who rushed to comply. The TARDIS began to shake. "Hold on!" he told them. "The signal is pulling us through!"

Ianto was standing behind Jack when the fourth section of the computer screen, the section that had been occupied by Harriet Jones before her death, cleared. A young man in a brown pinstriped suit was staring out that them. Behind him on the right was a fiery-haired woman, and on his left was another woman, a blonde.

"Where the hell have you been?" Jack demanded. "We've been ringing you for ages!"

"It's the Daleks, Doctor!" Sarah Jane exclaimed, and then her eyes widened. "Is that Rose?"

"Hello Sarah Jane!" the blond girl, Rose said. She had a wide and generous smile. "Hello Ianto and Gwen!" she continued and waved to them. They traded slightly confused looks, as they had never seen any of the newcomers before. Lee moved out of the shadows to peer over Jack's shoulder. The ginger woman gasped.

"Doctor!" she cried. "Doctor, that's Lee!"

"So that's your Doctor?" Gwen asked Jack. She eyed the alien appraisingly. "He's a bit nice—thought he'd be older."

"He's not that young," Ianto reminded her dryly.

The Doctor blinked. "What, Lee from the Library?"

"Donna!" Lee shouted, and shoved forward, pushing Gwen to the side. "Donna, I looked but you were gone!"

"We can talk about this later!" Martha snapped. "Doctor, they're taking people, but not everyone. And no one's allowed out on the street!"

"Right," the Doctor said, trying to regain control of the conversation. "Right. Anyway, good to see you all!" A huge, manic grin split his face. "Look at you all, you clever, clever people! You're brilliant!"

Then the screen went dark. The Doctor smacked the monitor. "No, no no! There's another signal coming through! Is that you, Mickey the not-so-much-of-an-idiot?"

"Your voice is different," a new voice said. It was strange, grating and garbled, as if it had been fed
through a synthesizer. "But the arrogance remains unchanged."

The Doctor froze. "That's impossible," he whispered. "I saw you die in the first year of the Time War. Your command ship flew straight into the jaws of the Nightmare Child." He swallowed. "I tried to save you."

"Nothing is impossible, Doctor, not for Davros, Lord and Creator of the Dalek Race." The screen cleared and Donna flinched away in horror. Davros was hideous. His skin was wrinkled and almost translucent with age. It hung in folds like worn paper from his bones. Both of his eyes were missing, and he seemed to use a blue orb set into his forehead to see. He sat in something that resembled the bottom half of a Dalek—or perhaps he simply lacked legs. One arm appeared immobile, and the other was covered by a thick black sleeve and a metal glove, complete with claw-like nails. He drummed the fingers of his functional hand as he spoke, and the click of metal added a chilling counterpoint to his words.

The Doctor grabbed Rose's hand. She stared at the screen, faintly ill. Whoever this wreck of a man was, he was terrifying. The Doctor was squeezing her hand so hard it was almost painful, and she could feel him shaking. Rage or fear or both—she couldn't tell.

"Emergency temporal shift took Dalek Caan into the heart of the Time War," Davros continued, "and it was he who saved me, he—a single, simple Dalek—when Time Lords and Emperors failed."

"That's impossible!" the Doctor snapped. "The entire war is time locked!"

"And yet he succeeded." Davros's voice was low and mocking.

"You made a new race of Daleks," the Doctor said, half to himself. There was a flatness to his voice that frightened Donna. It reminded her of how he had been with the Racnoss—empty and raging, unforgiving as a maelstrom and just as ready to pull everyone near him beneath the waters and into the silence of death.

"I gave myself to them quite literally," Davros agreed. "Each of them cloned from a single cell of my body." He pulled back his shirt and Donna fought the urge to retch. She could see his bones, and behind them, his heart. Even Rose looked sick at the sight.

A muscle in the Doctor's jaw twitched. "After all this time," he grated out. "After everything we've seen, after everything we've lost, I have only one thing to say to you." He pulled a lever. "Bye!" And then they were off, spinning through space.
Jack bolted around the room, collecting bits and bobs from Torchwood’s stock of alien weapons. Lee grabbed his arm. "I’m coming with you," he told Jack.

Jack cocked an eyebrow. "I’m flattered, but I move faster on my own, and I’ve got to get to the Doctor."

"And I’ve got to get to my wife." The other man was adamant. Jack tried ordering him, but Lee pointed out that as soon as Jack was gone he would go after him. Jack tried persuading him, but Lee refused to be moved. Finally Jack threw up his hands.

"On your head be it," he said.

"Dalek saucer heading over the bay," Ianto told Gwen. "They’ve found us."

Jack picked up his phone and cursed. The screen was cracked down the middle and it was in two separate pieces. Ianto shook his head, a small smile curving his lips. Then he handed over his own phone. "Martha’s programmed in," he told his lover. A quick phone call and his Vortex Manipulator was back on line. All he needed was the teleport basecode, which project Indigo was able to provide. He probably shouldn’t have told her what the oscillating four and nine was, but the Doctor could scold him later, after they saved the world.

He slipped into his (very impressive) coat and tossed one of the alien weapons to Lee. The other man caught it with a grunt. It looked spindly, but was surprisingly heavy. "That should be able to cut through Dalek battle armor," he said. "You don’t have to do this. You can stay here with Gwen and Ianto and protect the base."

Lee shook his head. "If Donna’s going to be there, than so am I."

Jack held out his arm. "Put your hand on my wrist, over the Vortex Manipulator," he instructed, "and don’t let go." He turned to Gwen and Ianto and flashed them a smile. "I’m coming back." They looked like they didn’t believe him. "I am," he insisted.

"Don’t worry about us," Gwen told him.

Ianto nodded. "We’ll be fine."

Jack grinned. "You’d better be." Then he pushed a button on the Vortex Manipulator and he and Lee vanished.

Mr. Smith spouted out coordinates for the TARDIS’s projected landing sight and Sarah Jane got her coat. Luke watched her, eyes wide. There were Daleks outside. She was terrified of Daleks, and she
was going to risk it all to find the Doctor. He'd heard stories about the last of the Time Lords, the alien who could renew his entire body. He'd even met him once, just after the Battle of Canary Wharf and Sarah Jane had adopted him.

"There are Daleks out there," he told his mother.

"I know," she replied breathlessly. "But I have got to find the Doctor!" She grabbed her sonic lipstick and her phone and paused next to the door. She crossed the distance between them in three quick strides and hugged him tightly. "I love you," she told him. "Remember that. Don't move. Don't leave the house—don't do anything." She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek, something that he would usually pull away from and complain about. He didn't, not this time. And then she was gone, running down the stairs and through the door and out to her car, which was parked in the driveway.

Mickey stood. "Right. It's time we were off." He pushed a few buttons on the Dimension Cannon. "I've set it to take me directly to the Doctor, no messing about with coordinates."

River's eyebrows shot up. "That's an impressive feat."

He shrugged. "Just because we're not Time Lords doesn't mean we're not clever," he replied with a crooked smile. "Rose's TARDIS key gives off a certain kind of radiation, just like anything or anyone who's traveled in time, but there's more. The key is part of the TARDIS. Tosh—Toshiko Sato—she's brilliant, and she figured out a way to link the Canon to the key."

"And through the key, to the TARDIS," River finished. She was smiling. "I'm sure you had nothing at all to do with that, Mickey Smith."

"Not so much of an idiot these days," he replied flippantly. Jenny chuckled and River rolled her eyes. She turned to Sylvia and Wilf, who were watching them from the living room.

"Thank you," she told them sincerely. "We couldn't have done it without you."

Wilf snorted. "Thank you! We'd have been dead for sure."

"Wish us luck," Mickey called as he held out his wrist. River and Jenny each placed a hand on top of the cannon. Before the other two had a chance to reply there was a flash of blinding light, and the three visitors were gone.

She should be dead. She'd taken the car and almost run straight into two Daleks. They had seen her (how could they not?) and been ready to fire. She'd closed her eyes in anticipation—of a shot that didn't come. Sarah Jane Smith cracked one eye warily, and then both eyes snapped wide open. Two twisted, smoking hunks of metal sat where there had been two murderous aliens. She threw open the car door and stumbled out. Adrenaline surged through her body and she could feel her legs trembling. She was alive.

A familiar voice brought her out of her state of semi-shock. "Bloody useless thing," Mickey Smith snapped.

"Well, maybe not totally useless," a pretty ginger girl commented. "Dad would be pretty cross if Sarah Jane was killed."

The third person—a curly-haired woman—watched Sarah Jane with a sympathetic expression.
"Leaves you a bit shaky," she commented. "But the rush is something, yeah?"

Sarah Jane nodded, and then proceeded to hug Mickey. "Mickey Smith! Look at you! But—but he said you weren't coming back, you and Rose." She laughed. "That will teach him to say impossible!"

Mickey hugged her back. "Good to see you, Sarah Jane," he told her. He looked like he wanted to say more, but River tugged on his sleeve.

"We can't stay here in the open," she said as her eyes roamed over the street in front of them. "Those two Daleks may have been alone, but when they don't report back more will come looking for them, and we definitely don't want that."

"Why didn't the Dimension Cannon take us straight to the Doctor?" Jenny wanted to know. "Not that I'm objecting, but I thought you said it would."

Mickey pulled a face. "Theoretically, it should. Must have gotten pulled off-course." He frowned. "Sarah Jane, do you still wear your TARDIS key?"

She pulled it out of her pocket. "Not usually, but today, well, it seemed like a good idea."

Mickey nodded. "That's why. Just give me a sec—I can get a fix on him, assuming there aren't too many TARDIS keys close by."

Martha slipped project Indigo back over her shoulders. Her mother watched, arms clasped about her, from the doorway. She hadn't been expecting to end up in London. Really, she hadn't known what to expect, she'd just pulled the cords that started the experimental teleportation device and hoped. Apparently it was a bit telepathic, because it took her where she most wanted to be: it took her home. And then Harriet Jones had hijacked the laptop and they'd managed to bring the Doctor to Earth, to let him know what was happening.

"What are you doing?" her mother asked, but Martha could tell that she already knew.

"I have to go, Mum." Her voice was quiet, but sure. "I've got a job to do."

"Don't." Her mother's voice was also quiet, but unshed tears hovered behind her composure. "Don't go, Martha."

"The world might be ending!" she replied, perhaps a bit more harshly than she'd intended. "And the Doctor is out there—but I'm still a member of UNIT, and I've got a duty to this planet." She took a deep breath and grasped the cords that hung from her shoulders. "I love you," she said, and her voice broke. "If something happens—tell everyone I love them too."

"Martha!" her mother cried, but she pulled the cords and the familiar sight of her home dissolved before her eyes.

She blinked, and she was surrounded by trees. She was in a forest, and going by the cries of nearby Daleks, she was in Germany. Perfect. She'd never been to the Osterhagen station, but she'd seen pictures, and as a high-ranking member of UNIT, she'd been required to memorize the coordinates. At the time she'd dismissed the practice as paranoia, but now the practicality was impossible to miss. Martha picked herself up off the ground. Time to do her job.
The Doctor threw open the TARDIS doors and stepped out onto the street. It was deserted—even the birds had vanished, and an eerie silence had settled into the concrete and steel. Rose followed close behind him, and Donna, albeit more cautiously.

"S a ghost town," Rose murmured.

"Sarah Jane said they were taking the people," Donna replied.

The Doctor ran a hand through his hair. "Yes, but for what?" He turned to his ginger companion. "Think, Donna. You saw Mickey in that fractured timeline. Did he say anything else?"

There was a burst of light, like a high-powered camera flash from an alley just ahead of them. The Doctor ignored it. Apparently he decided it was no threat. Instead, he focused on Donna. Rose, however, glanced behind him and promptly froze. Someone she thought she'd never see again had just stepped out of the now-dark alley and onto the street proper. Donna's eyes flickered over the Doctor's shoulder, and Rose knew she'd seen it too.

"Why don't you ask him yourself?" the ginger woman answered, and jerked her chin to the side. The Doctor turned, and grinned.

"Mick-mickey-mickey!" he crowed. "Fancy meeting you here!" He blinked. "And Sarah Jane! Blimey, you move fast."

"Good to see you, boss," Mickey replied. "And I've got a few more friends." Donna gasped. Behind the brunette who was apparently Sarah Jane was Professor River Song, and a young, red-headed woman. Rose had embraced Mickey fiercely, but the Doctor was staring past him. At first Donna thought he was looking at Professor Song, but then she realized that the young woman had captured his attention. He looked like he had seen a ghost. His eyes bore into her, and she smiled shyly.

"Jenny?" he breathed.

Her smile widened. "Hello Dad."

He continued to stare. "But—but how? I waited! I waited for five and a half hours and there was nothing, not a glimmer, not a sign!"

She shrugged. "Guess it took me a while to figure the whole 'regeneration' thing out."

The Doctor took a hesitant step forward. "I can feel you," he murmured. "In my head. Why couldn't I earlier? I should have been able to—I should have known you were alive."

Jenny looked apologetic. "Sorry. I had to keep myself shielded. It wasn't time for you to know. There were things that had to happen, that wouldn't have happened if you knew I was alive."

One corner of his mouth tugged upward into a crooked smile. "Listen to you, all grown up and talking about timelines and all that. It's been a while since Messaline, hasn't it."

She nodded and worried her bottom lip with her teeth. "I've been learning how to be a Time Lady."

He smiled properly then, and swept her up into a massive hug. "You're alive! You're really alive! And you're brilliant, you are!" He put her back down, and then frowned. "And you're ginger! I've wanted to be ginger for ages! Nine hundred years and I've never been ginger, and you get it on the first go!" He huffed. "Not fair, that is."
"Let's continue the reunion on the TARDIS, shall we?" River suggested brightly. "I think the last two should be here any minute."

Another burst of light left stars dancing in front of their eyes, this time from the direction of the TARDIS. She heard his voice before she saw him, and it made her breath catch in her throat. It was the same as she remembered, exactly the same.

"Donna!" Lee yelled, and bolted towards her. He wrapped his arms around her and she melted into him. He felt the same—warm and solid, and he even smelled the same—like sandalwood and aftershave and just a hint of damp earth.

"It's you," she whispered. "Oh god, I didn't imagine it! It's you!"

"This is just beautiful," Jack commented dryly, "but we're sitting ducks. TARDIS, now." He held out one arm to River, the other to Sarah Jane, and gave them both a wicked grin. "Shall we, ladies?"

Mickey Smith was a bit surprised. He'd expected that Rose would be happy to see him, but she clung to him with a ferocity that was startling. "Hey, babe, what happened?" he asked when they were safely back in the TARDIS.

She was pale and shaking and she held one of his hands. Her other hand was firmly entwined with the Doctor's. "I thought you were dead," she told him, her voice breaking. "I thought I killed you."

He blinked. "What? Rose, that's rubbish. I'm right here, obviously alive."

"You didn't come back, Mickey." She took a deep breath, held it for a moment, and then let it out slowly. When she spoke again her voice was even. "When the stars came back—you didn't. The Dimension Cannon stopped working, and you were gone."

He frowned at her. "What are you talking about, Rose?"

The Doctor squeezed her hand comfortingly, and released Jenny so he could pull Rose into a hug. She relaxed against him, drawing comfort and support from his proximity. "How old am I, Mickey?" she asked finally.

He shrugged. "I dunno—twenty three, twenty four?"

She shook her head. "I'm two-hundred and four years old. Two-hundred and five in three months."

He gaped at her for a moment, and then shut his mouth with a click. "Well," he said after a while. "That's—I would say impossible, but knowing you two, impossible doesn't mean what I thought it does."

"Rose is from further on in your timeline," the Doctor said softly. "But she found me earlier—about a year ago linearly speaking. There was a paradox that was strong enough to warp the fabric of reality and allow her to slip through without destroying the walls between the universes."

"Right." Mickey nodded. "Well, something big is happening now, Doctor. The stars are going out."

"We noticed," Donna remarked. She stood with her arm wrapped loosely around her husband. Lee was staring around the room, gobsmacked.

"D-d-d-donna," he murmured. "It's—"
"Bigger on the inside," she finished with a smile. "Lee, this is the TARDIS. The skinny boy in the suit is the Doctor—it's his ship. The blonde he's all over is Rose, his girlfriend." The Doctor wrinkled his nose. "What, spaceman?" she demanded.

"Girlfriend?" he asked with some distaste. "It just sounds so—inadequate."

Donna rolled her eyes. "Whatever, you daft alien," she replied, and continued with the introductions. Jenny, of course, beamed at her and swooped in for a hug, which Donna happily returned. The now-ginger Time Lady-in-training also hugged Rose. although she tended to stay close to the Doctor, who followed her with his eyes when he wasn't watching Rose. The whole experience felt—surreal. She'd started to believe that she'd made Lee up, that he'd been just a bit of code that Charlotte had devised to keep her from being lonely, but he was here. Really here.

Then the TARDIS lights flickered off. The Doctor rushed to the console. He pressed buttons and flipped levers, but to no affect.

"What's happening?" Rose asked. As always, she was by his side.

He stepped back and tugged on his hair. "They've got us in some kind of Chronon loop."

"English, spaceman!" Donna snapped.

"We're trapped," he said flatly. "They've cut the TARDIS off from her fuel source, from the rest of the universe. We're sitting ducks."

"Doctor," the mechanical scream that was the voice of a Dalek proclaimed, "you will exit the TARDIS or die."

The Doctor stared at the doors for a moment, and then straightened. He turned to face the others. They were watching him expectantly, waiting for a plan. "We'll have to go out," he said finally. "Cause if we don't, they'll get in."

Rose blinked. "You told me nothing could get through those doors."

"You've got extrapolator shielding," Jack protested.

He was calm, but determined, and his hands were fisted in his trouser pockets. "The last time we fought the Daleks they were scavengers and hybrids and mad, but this is a fully-fledged Dalek Empire at the height of its power. They're experts and fighting TARDISes. They can do anything, and she's not built for battle." He took Rose's hand. "Right now that wooden door is just wood."

"I can take two people," Mickey volunteered. "The Cannon still works—but any more than that and it's dodgy."

The Doctor nodded sharply. "Sarah Jane and Donna."

"What?" the ginger woman cried.

"Excuse me?" Sarah Jane asked at the same time. "If you think I'm going to sit this one out just because I'm not as young as the rest of you—"

The Doctor held his hands up placating. "No, that's not it at all. I'm holding you three in reserve. I can stall for time, but if something goes wrong then I need you out there finding a way to stop them."
"I've got another Cannon," Rose volunteered. "I can set the coordinates, and then we'll have six people on the outside, instead of just three."

"You should go with them," the Doctor said softly.

She snorted. "That's never gonna happen. I told you, Doctor. I'm not leaving you, not ever."

"I'm familiar with the theory," River said. "Show me how to use it, and I'll take Jenny and Lee." It took less than a minute for Rose to hand over her transport. Their good-byes were brief, and then Mickey, Donna, Sarah Jane, River, Jenny, and Lee disappeared.

Jack grinned. "Looks like it's the old team again."

"We'll go out together, yeah?" Rose asked. The Doctor nodded.

"Together."

"Daleks," Jack commented as they walked to the door. "Oh god."

"I know," Rose replied. She smiled, but there was a quaver she couldn't quite keep out of her voice.

The Doctor reached the doors, but turned back to face them. "It's been good though, hasn't it?" he asked. "Everything we've seen, everything we've done." He smiled. "You were brilliant," he told Jack, who beamed at him. "And you were brilliant," he told Rose.

She rolled her eyes. "That is not what you say just before you die," she told him. Then she grabbed the lapels of his suit jacket and pulled him into a proper snog. When she was satisfied that he was suitably breathless she released him. "I love you," she murmured.

"Quite right too," he joked, and then sobered. "I love you, Rose Tyler, with both my hearts, for the rest of my life—however long that is."

The Daleks appeared unaware of the others. That was good, that was one thing in their favor, because Rose had no idea what they were supposed to do next. The Doctor appeared relaxed, but he held her hand tightly as they were 'escorted' belowdecks. Jack was gone. She knew that he couldn't die—knew that he'd get back up after the Dalek shot him—but watching him die in front of her was different than knowing. She wanted to be sick. He'd screamed as the energy bolt hit his skin, and Rose knew that it had to hurt like hell. He felt it, he'd told her. He felt every death, every injury, and his body never had a chance to build up callouses or toughen his skin, so every strike felt like the very first.

Logically she knew that it was a good plan. Jack was clever and amazing with technology, especially the sophisticated stuff that the Daleks would be using. Mickey was good with computers, but he didn't have the same experience Jack did with future tech. Jack could find the others and they could figure out what was going on, and how to stop it, while she and the Doctor acted as distractions. After all, the Daleks were primarily focused on the Doctor. Anyone else was expendable. Logically it made a hell of a lot of sense—but that didn't mean she liked it one bit.

The 'Vault' was bigger than she thought it would be—almost cavernous—although one corner was filled by a massive machine. Red light seemed to emanate from the walls, which seemed to be made up of hexagonal plates of metal welded together. It gave the structure the appearance of a giant beehive. The Daleks maneuvered them into the center of the room, and then the air shimmered around them.
"Holding cell," the Doctor murmured, and flicked it lightly. Bluish waves cascaded around them. "Energy based. Gives you a nasty shock if you hit it too hard." He was speaking to her, but not looking at her. His eyes were fixed on the figure in front of them.

Davros had been waiting. He was even more grotesque in person than he had been on the TARDIS monitor. His skin was a sickly yellow color, mottled with what appeared to be a multitude of bruises, but could have been freckles, for all she knew. His eye-sockets were covered in thick scabs and she knew that beneath his bizarre leather lab-coat bits of flesh clung to dingy-looking bones, bare to the elements. Quite frankly, he made her ill. Revulsion pulsed through her.

And then she caught the whisper of a song in the back of her mind. It was the TARDIS, always the TARDIS, but it was—different again. The Doctor and Davros were trading barbed insults, but she stared off to the side, absorbed in the music within her head. The TARDIS needed her to do something, needed her to remember. But remember what?

"You're not in charge of the Daleks anymore, are you?" the Doctor asked with a vicious smirk as he glanced around the chamber. "'Cause the Supreme Dalek, he said 'vault,' like—'dungeon,' or 'prison.'" He rocked on the balls of his feet, one hand still wrapped around Rose's, the other swinging loose by his side. "They've got you locked away down here in the basement like what—a servant? Slave?" The smirk returned. "'Court Jester?'"

Davros was not amused. "We have—an arrangement."

"Oh, I know." The Doctor's voice started out low and dangerous, and finished as a triumphant crow. "You're the Dalek's pet!"

Davros turned his attentions to Rose. "So full of fire, is he not? And to think, you crossed entire universes, striding parallel to parallel to find him again."

The Doctor stepped in front of her, shielding her with his body from the madman. "Leave her alone." The danger was back in his voice.

"She is mine, to do with as I will," Davros reminded him.

Oh, big mistake. Like the Doctor, Rose was most dangerous when she was cornered. "Oh yeah?" she asked dismissively. "So why'm I still alive, then?"

"You must be here," the warped, insane man said. "It was foretold, and not even the Supreme Dalek would dare contradict the prophecies of Dalek Caan." He pushed a button on his chair, which resembled a Dalek's battle armor, and a corner of the room brightened. A ball of slimy tentacles and a single eye sat atop a broken Dalek casement. "He is here," the thing gibbered. "Then ten-fold man. He dances in the lonely places. And the wolf approaches—she reaches into the Vortex and is not burned. So cold and dark—fire is coming, the endless flames!"

Rose shuddered. "What is that thing?" she asked the Doctor.

He stared at the twisted Dalek with something that could have been pity. "You've met before," he replied. "That's the last of the Cult of Skaro, but he flew into the Time War unprotected."

"Caan did more than that," Davros disagreed. "He saw time—its infinite complexity and majesty raging through his mind—and he saw you, both of you."

"This I have forseen in the wild and the wind. At the end of all things, the Doctor shall bear witness, and his precious children of time," Caan agreed, giggling. Rose had never heard a Dalek giggle before. It was mildly terrifying. "And she will burn brighter than the sun, than all the stars in the
heavens—the wolf is at the door."

"Stop it!" the Doctor yelled. "You're insane, that's all! A murderous insane killer and I will stop you."

"That's it." Davros's voice was soft, but satisfied. "The anger, the fire, the rage of the Time Lord who butchered millions."

"And what are you, then?" Rose asked caustically. "The whole purpose of the Daleks is to destroy. If anyone's to blame for the Time War, it's you. The Doctor did what he did because he had to. You're just—just sick."

Davros smirked. "So quick to defend him." His empty eye-sockets seemed to bore into her. "So much fire, so much strength. I have plans for you, little girl. When the universe is mine and the Doctor is dead we will see how fierce you can be."

"You will not touch her," the Doctor snarled. "Because I will stop you, Davros. Every time, I stop you."

"I very much doubt that, Doctor." Davros gloated. "The ending approaches—the testing begins."

"Testing of what?" Rose asked.

Davros smirked. "The reality bomb."

"Where are we?" Sarah Jane asked as she looked around the tiny room they'd materialized in.

"Storage chamber, looks like," Mickey responded. "River, Jenny, and Lee are nearby."

"Always a cupboard," Donna muttered. She was closest to the door, and she discovered that there was a window situated just a bit above eye-level. She stood on her tip-toes, and gasped. "The Daleks are out there, and they've got people!"

"Really?" Sarah Jane moved behind her. "What are they doing?"

"Lining them up, looks like," Donna replied. "If we're quiet, we might be able to hear what's going on."

"Looks like River's getting closer," Mickey told them, but the two women hushed him sternly. Donna watched and listened as the Daleks positioned the prisoners under some sort of machine. They were testing something—something that one of the Daleks called a 'reality bomb.' Above the prisoners, a green coil began to glow. The air hummed, the whole ship seemed to hum. Donna could feel the vibrations down to the tips of her toes—and then the people started disappearing.

Well, it wasn't disappearing, not exactly. It was more like they dissolved into clouds of dust, and then the dust vanished. They were dying. The Daleks were killing them, killing them in a way that Donna had never seen before. She pushed away from the window, her hand over her mouth as she struggled not to vomit.

"What happened?" Sarah Jane demanded, eyes wide, face pale. "What did they do?"

"They killed them," Donna told the other two, after she could breathe without retching. "It was awful. They just sort of disintegrated."
Rose and the Doctor stared at the screen. "What was that?" she asked him, her voice strained. All those people were dead. Just—gone. She had seen death before. She had seen blood and body parts and bone fragments, but this—there was nothing left. They were just—just—gone.

"Zed Neutrino energy flattened by the alignment of the planets into a single stream," he said dully.

"But what does that mean?" she pressed.

"Electrical energy, Miss Tyler," Davros explained gleefully. "Every atom in existence is bound by an electrical field. The reality bomb cancels it out. Structure falls apart. That test was focused on the prisoners alone. Full transmission will dissolve every form of matter."

"The stars are going out," she murmured.

"And the twenty seven planets act as one great big transmitter," the Doctor continued grimly. "Blasting that wavelength across the entire universe."

"Never stopping, never faltering, never fading," Davros agreed. "People and planets and stars will become dust, and the dust will become atoms, and the atoms will become—nothing. And the wavelength will continue, breaking through the rift at the heart of the Medusa Cascade into every universe, every parallel, every corner of creation. This is my ultimate victory, Doctor—the destruction of reality itself!"

"You're mad," Rose whispered.

A metal panel near the floor of the storage chamber burst inward, and Captain Jack Harkness rolled into the cramped space. "I had to climb through two miles of ventilation shafts," he complained. "Couldn't you have landed a little closer, Mickey Mouse?"

"You're one to talk, Captain Cheesecake," Mickey grumbled, but then they grinned at each other and hugged.

"That's 'beefcake,'" Jack told him.

Mickey pulled back. "And that's enough hugging!"

A hissing sound from the back of the compartment drew their attention, and they watched in amusement as a thin red line traced an arc on the wall from the floor almost to the ceiling and back again. There was a short pause, and then the sheet was thrust inward. They managed to dodge it just barely and River song strode in, followed by Jenny and Lee.

"Always liked kicking in doors," River said lightly. "Never know when it comes in handy." She tucked what appeared to be some kind of all-purpose weapons back into its holster at her side and her face turned serious. "Did you see what happened?"

They nodded. "There is something we can do," Sarah Jane said, and stepped forward. "You have to understand—I have a son down there, and he's fourteen years old." She pulled a translucent crystal on a golden chain from her pocket. "A Verron Soothsayer gave me this. He said, 'this is for the end of days.'"

River and Jack's eyes were shining. "Is that a warp star?" the Time Agent asked. Sarah Jane nodded and handed it over.
"What's a 'warp star'?” Mickey wanted to know.

“It's a warpfold conjugation in a carbonate shell,” Jenny told him, her voice awed.

"In English, please?” he asked again.

"It's an explosion,” River told him, grinning. "An explosion waiting to happen.”

Martha Jones toyed with the Osterhagen key. It looked innocuous enough—just a datacard, a bit thicker than most, but nothing outwardly deadly. Station Five—China—had just reported in. Station Four—Liberia—had been active before she’d arrived. That made three active stations, and three was all they needed.

"What happens now?” the soldier from China asked. Anna, she said her name was. Anna Zhou. "Do we do it?” The soldier Liberia wouldn't give his name, not with what they were about to do.

"Not yet,” Martha replied.

"But UNIT regulations state that as soon as three Osterhagen stations are active,” Anna began, but Martha cut her off.

"I've got a higher authority, way above UNIT, and there's one more thing the Doctor would do.” Every member of UNIT had heard stories about the Doctor, the mysterious alien who'd saved the world a thousand times or more. They knew his code—everyone deserves a chance to do the right thing. Even your enemy—especially your enemy.

"Incoming transmission," one of the Daleks announced, and Martha's face appeared on the hastily raised screen.

"My name is Martha Jones and I represent the United Intelligence Task Force on behalf of planet Earth,” she stated firmly. "I'm calling the Dalek Crucible, can you hear me?”

"Put me through!” the Doctor demanded, but Davros ignored him. Martha, however, heard.

"Doctor!” she exclaimed, but then her face fell. "I'm sorry.”

"Oh, the Doctor is quite powerless,” Davros assured her. "He is my prisoner. State your intent.”

She held up what appeared to be a thick data-card. "I've got the Osterhagen Key,” she said matter-of-factly. "Leave this planet and its people alone or I'll use it.” Davros did not appear impressed.

"What?” the Doctor asked, baffled. "What's an Osterhagen key?”

"There's a chain of 25 strategically placed nuclear warheads beneath the Earth's crust,” Martha explained, her voice level but her eyes pained. "If I use the key, they detonate, and the Earth gets ripped apart.”

"What?” he shouted. "Who invented that? Well, someone called Osterhagen I suppose, but Martha, are you insane!”

Her jaw twitched. "The Osterhagen key is to be used if the suffering of the human race is so great, so without hope that this becomes the final option.”
"That's never an option," he disagreed, and Rose could see his memories of the Time War resurfacing. He knew what it was like to destroy a planet, to condemn a people to death.

"Let me finish, Doctor," Martha ordered him, and Rose raised an eyebrow. She knew that Martha Jones had steel in her. The Doctor wouldn't have taken her as a companion if she didn't. "Because there's more. I reckon the Daleks need these 27 planets for something, but what if it becomes 26?" she redirected her attention to Davros. "What then? Would you risk it, Daleks?"

"Second transmission incoming—internal," another Dalek declared.

"Display," Davros ordered. The screen split, and they were staring at Jack, backed by Mickey, River, Jenny, Donna, Sarah Jane, and Lee.

"Calling all Dalek girls and boys," Jack began with his typical bravado. "This is Captain Jack Harkness, do you read me? Don't send in your goons or this baby gets it. I've got a warp star wired into the mainframe. One wrong move and this entire ship will go up."

"A warp star!" the Doctor exclaimed. "Where did you get a warp star?"

Sarah Jane pushed her way forward. "From me," she told him. "Because we saw it, Doctor. We saw what they're going to do!"

"Impossible," Davros murmured. "That face, that voice—after all these years."

"Davros," she acknowledged him. "It's been quite a while. Sarah Jane Smith, remember?" Her voice shifted, became mocking.

"Oh, this was meant to be; the circle of time is closing. You were there on Skaro," the madman continued, "at the beginning of my creation."

"I've learned to fight since then," she shot back. "You let Rose and the Doctor go, or this warp star, it gets opened!"

"Don't think I won't do it," Jack said, his eyes and voice like ice.

Rose grinned. There they were, defending the Earth. They were brilliant. The Doctor, however, was not looking at the screens. Instead he stared at the ground, his face flat. A muscle in his jaw twitched. She squeezed the hand she still held. "Doctor?" she asked softly. "Doctor, what's wrong?"

"The Doctor's soul is revealed," Dalek Caan babbled. "See him, see the heart of him."

"The man who abhors violence," Davros agreed, "never carrying a gun. But this is the truth of it, Doctor. You take ordinary people and you fashion them into weapons. Behold—your children of time, transformed into murderers. I made the Daleks, Doctor. You made this."

"They're trying to help," he said softly.

Rose couldn't stand it anymore. She hit the force field in front of her. Blue ripples spread through the air around her. "Stop it!" she shouted. "You're twisting everything! Where do you get the right to call someone a murderer, Davros of Skaro, creator of the Daleks! Your 'children' have caused more death and destruction than all of humanity! You're sitting on a ship in the middle of 27 planets you stole from their orbits, a ship designed to destroy everything in the multiverse that isn't a dalek, and you dare to call a group of people standing up to you murderers?" The Doctor blinked. He'd never seen Rose this angry. Never. He thought she might spontaneously combust, and he was surprised that Davros didn't burst into flames from the force of her glare. "How
much blood is on your hands, you sick, twisted, lunatic?" She paused, panting, and when she
continued her voice was low and deadly. "I will stop you. You are wrong."

"The point remains," Davros insisted. "How many have died in your name? How many have
sacrificed for their beloved Doctor? The man who keeps running, never looking back out of shame."

Rose tugged on his hand, and he turned to look at her. His eyes were deep and dark, raw and open.
"It's not your fault," she told him softly. "He's wrong. He's twisting things around so he doesn't have
to take the blame for his own actions."

"Enough talk!" Davros snapped. "Activate the Transmat!" A blinding white light filled the dual
screens, and then Martha, Mickey, Jack, River, Jenny, Donna, Lee, and Sarah Jane were lying in a
pile on the floor.

"On your knees!" Davros commanded. "Surrender!"

"Do as he says," the Doctor told them. Energy shields buzzed into life around them.

Davros turned back to the screens, which had coalesced into one. A red Dalek looked down at them.
"Supreme Dalek," he said. "The time has arrived. Detonate the reality bomb!" Then he whirled his
chair around. "And you, Doctor. You are connected to the TARDIS, are you not?" He pressed a
button on his chair and a pillar of light revealed the time-and-space ship just beyond their Dalek
guards. "Now, feel it die!"

"No!" the Doctor cried as a panel on the floor opened up and the ship dropped out of sight. He
slammed his fist against the invisible wall of the shield. The force of the concussion made the air
ripple like water around them. The TARDIS was a ship, but she was so much more. She was his
home, she was his companion from the beginning and she had remained always with him. Even
trapped on the Impossible Planet he had felt her comforting presence in his mind. Even when the
Master tore into her, forced her to become something abhorrent, he had felt her. He had fought tooth
and nail to keep her whole. He knew her like he knew himself—like he knew Rose. Their
relationship was different, of course, but it ran deep.

Rose slipped her hand into the Doctor's. He was shaking, trembling as he watched the TARDIS
buck and weave in the molten sphere that was the center of the Crucible. She could feel the pain
radiating off of him in waves, like heat off of pavement in the summer. And—and there was
something else. The TARDIS was crying out, screaming in Rose's mind like she had when the
Master cannibalized her. She could feel the TARDIS burning, and the image of a golden door
covered in strange, circular designs flashed behind her eyes. Deep in her consciousness there was
something buried—something ancient and powerful—and it wanted to be free. The Door beckoned.
She laid a hand on its warm, smooth surface, and opened it.

And remembered.

"No." The voice was soft, but certain and strangely choral.

He froze. He knew that voice. He'd heard it before, although never with these ears. He turned
around. Rose was glowing. It was subtle, almost imperceptible until you looked at her eyes. They
burned golden and he fought the urge to fall into them, to lose himself to the call of the Vortex.
When he was eight years old he'd looked into the Untempered Schism—and then he'd run away. He
joked with Martha Jones—*Oh, the ones that ran away. I never stopped running*—but it was the truth wrapped up in a candy-coat of flippancy. This body was good at being flippant.

He was staring into the Vortex through the eyes of a girl—no, not just a girl—through the eyes of the woman he loved, and he was entranced. The fear was still there, lending his fascination a sharp edge, but it made him giddy. What was it he told Ida, dangling over that trapdoor when they were stranded on the Impossible Planet? *It's darker than that—it's the urge to fall.*

The familiar sound of the TARDIS materializing rang throughout the room. He whirled around, and sure enough, his ship was fading into being. Rose dropped her hand and the energy shields around them shuddered and then fell.

The TARDIS’s doors snapped open.

"Don't look at the light!" the Doctor yelled and threw his arm in front of his eyes. "Whatever you do, don't look at it!"

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Martha barely had time to close her eyes before light bloomed in front of her securely shut eye-lids. Something streaked past her fast enough to pull air with it and a fierce wind battered at her, tugging at her clothes and hair. The light faded, and she cracked an eye open cautiously. What she saw made her gasp. Rose had been—odd, earlier. Off, and perhaps glowing slightly. Now—now she *blazed.* There was a sort of nimbus of golden light shining from her, like she was some kind of bizarre night-light, and although the air was still her hair blew back from her face in the grip of an intangible breeze.

"What is this?" Davros rasped. "This abomination? What have you done?"

*I am the Bad Wolf,* Rose replied in that strange dual voice. *I create myself.*

"Rose, you have to stop this," the Doctor pleaded. "You have to let go! You're going to burn!" The naked fear on his face took Martha's breath away. He was always so closed off, so guarded. More than once she'd wanted to shake him, to scream at him and make him say what he really meant, show what he really felt. At the moment he hid nothing. She could chart the flow of every thought, every emotion across his face. She could see the fear and the love and the awe battling within him.

Mickey's hand tightened painfully around hers. "Rose," he murmured hoarsely. She glanced over at him. He was staring at the woman, eyes wide, face pale. He looked a bit sick. "This is what happened," he continued, apparently talking to himself. "Last time, with the truck, this is what happened. Oh, we should have left that bloody box to rot."

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Jack watched the scene unfold before him. He thought he'd understood what the Doctor told him at the end of the universe—how Rose absorbed the Time Vortex and brought him back to life. Hearing about it was one thing, *seeing* her in all of the glory of the Bad Wolf was something else altogether. She was dazzling. The power radiated from her, but somehow she was still undeniably *Rose.* When he looked at her it was like the strength of her love and compassion had become visible, and his mind echoed with the illusive melody that greeted him at each death. It was as if she sang him to sleep before she brought him back.

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Jenny had always known that her mum was an extraordinary woman. It would take someone
exceptionally patient to love a man like the Doctor; it would take someone who was brave and compassionate and strong to love a man who loved the universe as much as he did. She had always known that her mother was a force to be reckoned with, that she could hold her own in a fight and face down dictators and emperors and sadistic, cruel people. She supposed that she hadn't realized, exactly, where that power came from. She had never asked why Rose's eyes flashed golden when she was angry, or the Doctor was threatened. She hadn't questioned the times when people had mistaken her for a goddess (vengeful, loving, defensive, fertile—the situations ran the gambit). Like other companions, Jenny had assumed that it was a hazard of time travel, like accidental marriages.

She thought that those people might have been closer to the truth than they knew.

Martha had always wondered why Rose was special, what she could offer the Doctor that Martha could not. Now Martha knew, and she remembered what she told Donna so many months ago. *He's like fire. Stand too close and people get burnt.* Rose suffered. Her family suffered because she loved him. She changed what she was, became not-quite-human, because she loved him, and Martha knew that she wouldn't have done the same. She didn't want to lose Martha Jones, didn't want her to be consumed. She knew that she couldn't carry the weight of him. The Doctor was like Atlas, with the universe on his shoulders, but Rose held him up, supported him, offered him everything she was. There were some lengths to which Martha Jones was not willing to go.

River watched them with a strange, small smile on her face. She had many reasons for becoming an archeologist: adventure, exploration, the thrill of discovery, the ability to integrate her knowledge of twenty-first century Earth into her career, but high among them was finding the Doctor and Rose. What better way to track a time traveler than through time itself?

There was one story that stuck with her. It was the first she'd ever read, back when she was working on her undergraduate degree. She'd been doing a bit of research on the side (never hurts to start early, after all) and she'd stumbled across an oral history of life on the Rim in the twenty-seventh century. At first she'd simply been interested in the time. Rim culture fascinated her—such a seamless mixture of high and low-tech: spaceships and horses, holographic windows and seedy pubs. It was brilliant, in a surreal, science-fiction sort of way. But then, her whole life was a bit science fiction.

And then she'd come across one particular history. *My name is Jason Tam,* the recording began. *And this is a story I heard from my father, who heard it from his father, who heard it from his aunt, who was River Tam of the Firefly Serenity.* She knew that ship. It was famous, really a part of history. The crew of *Serenity* had unearthed and exposed the Miranda Scandal, which was the basis of the reform movement that rebuilt the Alliance in the late twenty-sixth century. Intrigued, she allowed it to play further. *Long, long ago, before mankind left Earth—that-was-and-is, there was a girl who wasn't a girl. She looked like a girl, and spoke like a girl, and loved like a girl, but she was not. She was a wolf. But she didn't know it, and neither did anyone around her. She lived a very ordinary life—she worked, she laughed, she loved her mum—and then she met a man who wasn't a man. He looked like a man, and spoke like a man, and thought he was so impressive like a man—but he was not. He was fire and ice and rage, the night and the storm at the heart of the sun. He was ancient and forever, and he burns at the center of the universe. He was the last survivor of the greatest war that was ever fought—the war that was, is, and will never be. He was the last member of a race that traveled through time like we travel through the black. He saw the beginning and ending of the Earth—of the universe.*

*And she loved him. Because she loved him, she became more than a girl. She became the Bad Wolf.*
When she howled time itself bent to her will. When she raised her hand, armies turned to dust and the world was saved. But underneath it all, she was a girl, who loved a man. It was love that made her what she was, that gave her the strength to defy the universe itself when it tore them apart. Fear and hate can do terrible, terrible things, but love is stronger.

Long, long ago there was a girl who wasn't a girl, and a man who wasn't a man. They traveled in a box that wasn't a box; it was a space and time ship. And they lived, and they loved, and sometimes they saved the universe—and that was as it should be. River listened to the story over and over. It was the first clue she'd run into about the Doctor and Rose—it had to be them. It was also the first time she'd heard of the Bad Wolf. There were records of sightings and conversations and everywhere there was 'Bad Wolf.' She'd written her name on the universe, a message to keep him safe.

"This is what you do, Doctor." Davros spoke again, his voice harsh and grating and triumphant. "This one is special, she carries your hearts, and look what you've done to her! Of all your children of Time, she is the one you will not be without, and she is the greatest weapon of them all! What has she sacrificed for you? What has she become for you?"

A muscle in the Doctor's jaw twitched as images rose unbidden in his mind. Rose locked in a cell, broken and bloody. Rose on a cold steel operating table as masked and gowned Torchwood employees cut into her. Rose screaming as a telepath brutally entered her mind. Rose watching everyone she loved age and die while she remained young. Rose standing on Satellite One, while pieces of her home scatter into the depths of space. Rose burning from the Vortex. Rose without a face. Rose trapped on an impossible planet with no way home. Rose slipping, falling, saved from the Void only by one woman's persistent demands and one man's desire to please her. Rose standing on the beach sobbing, pouring her heart out to him. She had given him everything—and all he managed to give her was pain.

"Enough." Her voice was soft but there was steel in it. "Davros of Skaro, your words are poison and your presence here weakens the Time Lock. Leave this madness, this desire to conquer and control behind."

"Never!" he spat. "The universe is mine! I claim it by force of arms and the laws of nature. My Daleks are superior, and the Reality Bomb will ensure that we are the only life-forms in existence!"

"The Universe disagrees." Rose waved her hand and the Daleks surrounding them disappeared. Only Dalek Caan remained, cackling madly on his ruined shell. "This is your last chance, Davros. Let go."

"I refuse!" he screamed. His single, mechanical eye glared balefully out and he was practically frothing at the mouth. "You cannot stop me! I will be victorious!" He stretched one metal-plated finger out at the Doctor. "This is your fault! You destroyed me, Doctor, destroyed my creations, my children! You destroyed your own planet and all of your people in your arrogance. I name you forever—you are the Destroyer of Worlds!"

"I name you," Rose countered, "Time's Champion. Healer, and Wise man." She lifted her hand and cupped his cheek gently. "Defender of the Earth and Protector of the Universe. Friend and Father and Lover. My Doctor." There was another onslaught of images, but they were much different than the first. Rose taking her first step into Christmas of 1969. Rose standing on Woman Wept, her eyes large and her smile wide. Rose holding his hand. Rose hugging him when she managed to say...
'Raxicoricofallapatorious' correctly. Rose watching him tinker beneath the console. Rose dancing with him while Jack watched. Rose lying on his coat on New Earth just outside New New York. Dancing with Rose at the block party in honor of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation. Kissing Rose properly for the first time after she returned to him. Making love to her. The way she smiled at him.

Then her eyes flickered back to Davros and her voice hardened. "You have made your choice." She let her hand fall from the Doctor's face. "Back into the Time War, Davros of Skaro. Back into Hell."

And then he vanished.

"Rose." The Doctor's voice was low and rough. "Let go. Please, I can't lose you again, please, just let go."

She smiled at him. "My Doctor. Did you really think that you're the only one who can save the universe?" Then her eyes rolled back into her head, and she fainted. He caught her almost immediately and held her close to him. A fine golden mist streamed from between her parted lips and wound its way through the air and back into the TARDIS. The doors slammed shut, and they were left alone on a deserted ship.
Chapter Notes

Nothing you recognize belongs to me! Some references to 'The Empty Child,' and one quote taken from 'New Earth.'

For a second time itself seemed to hold its breath. The crack of not-wood on not-wood echoed through the suddenly silent ship. The Doctor waited—for her heart to stop, for her body to cool, for the universe to rip her away from him again (like it seemed to do with all good things). And then, miraculously, it didn't. She was warm and alive, if unconscious, in his arms. He held her tightly and buried his face in her hair. He'd been ready to take it from her again, to kiss the Vortex out of her. He didn't care that he was running low on regenerations. If there was a choice between living (or dying) in a universe with Rose Tyler, and living (or dying) in a universe without, he'd chose the universe with her any time. Every time.

_The universe needs you_, she'd told him the last time she'd offered up her life for his.

_Please_, he'd replied. What he had left unsaid, was _but I need you_.

Reality intruded upon his thoughts far too quickly. He wanted to stay where he was, his arms around her, breathing in the reminder that she was very much still with him—but there were 27 planets that were currently in the wrong part of the universe and seven people who were depending on him to get them home. He scooped Rose up, holding her in his arms easily, and then deposited her in the arms of a startled Mickey Smith. "Jack, River!" he barked. "With me." He flashed them a cocky grin. "Ever transmatted a planet before, Professor Song?"

Her answering smile was slow and wide. "Now that would be telling, Doctor."

Martha motioned for Mickey to set Rose down. "I'm a doctor," she said briskly, and proceeded to check the unconscious woman's vitals. "Pulse is steady and strong, and her breathing's good as well. No visible signs of distress." She sighed and sat back on her heels. "Looks like she's fine, just not awake." She smiled at Mickey, and held out her hand. "Martha Jones."

He shook it. "Mickey Smith."

Her smile brightened. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Smith."

Donna watched River, Jack, and the Doctor push buttons and flip switches. Every so often one of them would call out the name of a planet. "Any idea what they're doing?" she asked Sarah Jane and Jenny.

"I think they're rerouting the dimensional transport engine and overhauling the intertemporal stabilizers," the ginger girl replied. She was studying the scene before her intently, as if she was trying to memorize their actions.
Donna raised an eyebrow. "Earth girl, remember?"

Jenny blushed. "Right. Sorry, been spending too much time with Dad lately. I think they're reversing the transmat. They're sending the planets back."

Sarah Jane held up a hand. "Can someone explain to me how the Doctor has a daughter? And how Rose came back?"

It was a long and complicated story, but thankfully by the time Donna, Mickey, Jenny, and Martha finished bringing Sarah Jane up to speed the Doctor, River, and Jack had managed to send all of the 27 planets back where they belonged—including Earth.

"Come on you lot," the Doctor said as he gently lifted Rose off of the smooth floor of the Crucible. "Can't stand around yapping all day. Into the TARDIS!"

When everyone was safely through the doors the Doctor moved to hand Rose off again, but River stopped him. "Go," she said firmly and pointed in the direction of the infirmary.

He glared at her. "Someone has to fly the TARDIS, Professor Song, and while Donna is doing well in her lessons, she's hardly qualified."

River smiled smugly. "Oh sweetie, I'm going to fly her and handsome Jack is going to assist me. Between the two of us I'm sure we can get her back to Earth and probably land her with significantly less trauma." She winked at Sarah Jane. "He thinks the stabilizers are ornamental, bless."

The Doctor huffed. "She's my ship—"

River raised an eyebrow. "And she's your wife." She gestured to Rose, still cradled protectively in his arms.

"Wife?" Mickey asked. The others were staring at the two of them, well, except for Jenny, who was smiling, and Jack, who said "about time!"

The Doctor was blushing. Martha didn't think she'd ever seen him blush before. "Not exactly," he began, but broke off. "Fine, then. Try not to crash us, please?"

"You can fly the TARDIS?" Sarah Jane asked River.

"I had lessons from the best," the other woman replied, and shot the Doctor an amused look. "Pity himself was busy that day." Sarah Jane tittered, and the Doctor realized once again as he walked down the corridor to the infirmary that getting past and future companions together was never a good thing.

River watched him go, and then turned to face the others. "Right!" she said decisively. "Where are we off to first? Donna? Lee? Sarah Jane? Martha?"

"I'm with Jack," Lee said. The others blinked, a bit startled. He'd said less than twenty words since he'd appeared with Jack and hearing his voice seemed somehow odd.

Donna clasped his hand. "And I'm not letting you out of my sight," she told him.

Sarah Jane cleared her throat. "I do need to get back home; Luke will be worrying." She flashed
them a smile. "I'm pretty sure he thinks I'm mad, dashing off like that, Daleks everywhere. Unless—could I bring him onboard? I want to be here, in case, well. In case." In case Rose doesn't wake up, she thought, but didn't say it. She didn't need to.

"There's thousands of rooms on the TARDIS," Jack told her and laid an affectionate hand on the coral wall. "I'm sure she can find a place for Luke to sleep. As for me, I'd like to see my team again, and I'm betting that beautiful here could use a top up."

Martha shrugged. "I'd like to be on hand as well. I'm sure the Doctor's brilliant with alien stuff, but I'm the only qualified human doctor in this ship."

"Ealing, to pick up Luke, and then off to Cardiff," River agreed. "Come on, pretty boy! Time to earn your keep!"

The Doctor didn't notice at all when they stopped in Ealing, and he barely glanced up when River and Jack settled the TARDIS more permanently in Cardiff. He'd run every scan he could think of, and they all told him the same thing: nothing was wrong with Rose Tyler's body. Her vitals were strong and she didn't appear to be in any distress—she just wouldn't wake up.

"How's she doing, Doc?" Jack asked as he strolled into the room and pulled up a chair on the opposite side of the bed Rose occupied.

"Don't call me 'Doc,'" he replied automatically and did not look up.

Jack was not put off. "How is she?"

The Doctor sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "She's fine, or she would be if she would just wake up."

"The stories said that Time Lords were telepathic," Jack remarked. "Have you considered telepathy? If the issue isn't with her body, it almost has to be with her mind, and what better way to find out than to go to the heart of the problem?"

He shook his head. "Oh, I'm telepathic—but I won't do that to her, not unless I have to." His lips quirked into a small smile. "She's always been touchy about people getting near her head. You should have heard the argument we had after I told her the TARDIS got in there to translate—but when she was in that alternate universe she had a run-in with a telepath."

Jack winced. "Ouch."

The Doctor snorted. "Ouch is an understatement. I know exactly how strong her barriers were, Jack. I put them there myself, and then someone ripped them apart." A muscle on his jaw twitched. "What they did—it's worse than rape and just as traumatizing. If a Time Lord did that he'd be forcibly regenerated." He brought her limp hand to his lips and kissed it gently. Jack was considerably more perceptive than most people gave him credit for being. He knew that the time for speech was over. He stood, and gave the Doctor's shoulder a comforting squeeze on his way out of the room.

"Let me know if you need anything," he told the alien. The Doctor nodded, and then went back to his vigil. Jack watched them from the door for a moment, and then turned back towards the rest of the ship, and the Hub beyond it. "Please wake up, Rose," he murmured. "I don't think he could stand to lose you again."
All was quiet in the Torchwood Hub. Jack and Ianto had gone off to bed, and the occupants of the strange ship parked just inside the cavernous main room left hours ago, most of them citing exhaustion, which left Gwen the exciting task of monitoring the Rift at night. She didn't really mind. Rhys wasn't expecting her back until tomorrow morning and she was too wired to sleep anyway.

In the space of twenty-four hours, the Earth had been removed from and returned to its place orbiting the sun. A space-and-time ship that outwardly appeared to be a police public call box from the 1960's had materialized on their doorstep, the Dalek that had trapped them in Tosh's time lock had vanished, Jack had returned, Martha had appeared, and Lee had introduced them to a brash ginger woman named Donna—who happened to be his wife. This, of course, led to a story about a library (that was a planet) in the fifty-first century and the Vashta Nerada. Gwen shivered. She didn't think that she would ever look at shadows the same way again.

She didn't think she'd ever look at the world the same way either. She'd joined Torchwood because she'd seen a weevil kill a man—and then managed to fight off the effects of Retcon, an amnesiac drug, in time to discover that one of Torchwood's agents was responsible for a string of deaths. In the space of forty-eight hours her entire world view had changed. Suddenly she was aware of how much larger the universe was, and today it seemed to have gotten bigger. There hadn't been much to do when she and Ianto were trapped in the Hub. The time lock meant that nothing could get in to hurt them, but it also kept them from getting out. They'd passed the time by telling stories, first about their respective families and childhood, but gradually they'd moved on to more pertinent ground. They had been confined for an hour when Ianto began to tell her about the mysterious Doctor.

He told her about Queen Victoria and the Werewolf, about how the Doctor had managed to prevent the wolf from biting the monarch, but frightened her so badly that she set up an entire organization devoted to protecting Great Britain from aliens and capturing him, if he ever returned. Of course, apparently he returned often enough, but there were other organizations running interference. UNIT, for example, and then Ianto spent a good twenty minutes explaining what UNIT was and what it did—which was essentially what Torchwood did, only for the world, and with a great deal more bureaucracy (and cooperation with the Doctor).

It was the Doctor, Ianto told her, who figured out how to destroy the Daleks and Cybermen during the Battle of Canary Wharf. It was the Doctor (and his companions) who fought off the Sontarans, and apparently also the Doctor who blew up ten Downing Street several years ago. He seemed to be in awe of the alien, although Gwen thought she detected a hint of jealousy. She'd seen Jack's face when the Doctor, Donna, and the blonde girl (Rose, Sarah Jane had called her) had appeared on the screen. They had a history. She sighed. Jack was so damn close-mouthed about his past. They risked their lives together and sometimes she felt like she hardly knew him. Would it kill him to let them in?

Perhaps. She stood, and stretched. For the millionth time in the past three hours, her eyes wandered to the blue box parked a few feet away. The Rift was quiet. It wouldn't hurt to take a peek, would it? She'd always wanted to see a spaceship—and really, how had all of the people Jack had introduced her to fit inside that little thing? She walked over and pulled the door lightly. It swung open smoothly. She gaped.

It was huge. Somehow a room almost the size of the hub fit into a box that was less than three meters cubed! The lights pulsed, and the ship hummed at her in a way that seemed almost—welcoming. Gwen took that as a good sign, and stepped inside. The door closed silently behind her. Some kind of control console surrounded a pillar that reached to the ceiling and shone with a bluish light. The whole room looked like something out of a science fiction novel—organic and mechanical all at once. The lights pulsed again, this time from the opposite side of the room, and Gwen could see a hallway. The soft sound of voices floated through the air, and she followed them.
Gwen blinked. She was standing just outside a kitchen, a normal, earth-style kitchen. The floor was some kind of dark wood and the walls were a sunny yellow. Cabinets covered most of the wall space, but one was empty, save for a cut-out pass-through that opened onto what looked like a dining room. A small table sat tucked out of the way, and three women occupied chairs around it.

"Hello Gwen," River Song said. "Fancy a cuppa?" She gestured for the other woman to join them, and Gwen did, feeling more than a little out of her depth. Sarah Jane smiled at the Welsh woman, and the other girl, Jenny, Jack had called her, sipped her tea.

"Can't sleep?" Sarah Jane asked sympathetically.

Gwen shook her head. "Too wound up for that."

The older woman nodded. "Me too. It's been an eventful day."

Jenny snorted. "That's one way of putting it."

Gwen fixed herself a mug of tea, and sighed appreciatively. Ianto and Jack preferred coffee, but she'd always been a tea girl. Coffee was for staying awake, tea was for relaxing. "What happened up there?" she asked. "Jack wouldn't say."

Sarah Jane shook her head. "I don't really know," she said quietly. "It was like nothing I've ever seen before."

River set her mug down. "It was the Bad Wolf."

Gwen blinked. "What?"

"Davros, the man who created the Daleks, found a way out of the Time War," the other woman began. "It should have been impossible, seeing as the Doctor time locked the entire war, but he did and," she paused. "You have no idea what I'm talking about."

Jenny laughed. "You're getting too much like Dad, River." She turned to Gwen. "S like this. There was a war, the biggest, deadliest war the universe has ever seen, between the Daleks and the Time Lords—my dad's people. He had to stop it, because if he didn't it was going to tear apart the entire universe, so he pulled it out of the time line, set it up in its own little bubble that nothing could get into or out from."

Gwen nodded. "Tosh did something like that for the Hub."

"Wish I could have met her," Jenny said wistfully. "Sounds like she was brilliant."

Gwen nodded. It took a moment for the lump in her throat to dissolve enough so she could speak. "Yeah, she was."

"Anyway," the girl's tone turned businesslike again. "Davros found a way out, a loophole, but him being here weakened the structure of the time lock, so mum sent him back."

"But how?" Sarah Jane interjected.

"Bad Wolf," River said. "When Rose first traveled with the Doctor she absorbed the Time Vortex—swallowed it whole in order to save the Doctor and destroy what they thought were the last of the Daleks to escape the Time War." She shook her head. "Bloody things keep coming back. The
Doctor took it out of her, of course, but not before it started to change her." She smiled fondly. "Never underestimate the power of a determined woman, especially when she's got the ear of an equally determined sentient space-and-time ship. What we saw was the bond that still exists between Rose and the TARDIS. You can't be host to the raw power of time and space without some side effects."

"That's why she hasn't aged," Jenny put in.

River nodded. "That was one of the changes, yes." She smiled. "Neither of them wanted him to be alone," Gwen yawned. The tea, and conversation, had helped to leech out some of the nervous energy that had been humming through her body. River, of course noticed. "You should get some sleep," she told the Welsh woman. "Exhaustion creeps up on you rather fast once the adrenaline's gone." She drank the last of her tea and set the mug on the table. "I've got to go tell himself to wake up his wife, all ready."

It had been hours. The Doctor sat in the same place had had when Jack left. His right hand held Rose's and he counted the beats of her heart by the throb of her pulse against his wrist. "Now really isn't the time," he said quietly.

River continued to lean against the doorway. "You were always heading for this, you know."

He glared at her. "Fine. I'll bite. For what?"

She pushed off of the doorframe and wandered inside the infirmary. "For this," she replied, and gestured to Rose. "You started on this path the moment you took her hand in the basement of Henrick's."

"How do you know about that?" he asked sharply.

She rolled her eyes. "Please, I've heard that story a million times—from you, from her, from my parents."

He raised an eyebrow. "Spoilers?"

She shrugged. "You don't know who they are, so not so much." She paused for a moment. "The TARDIS knew what was coming. Why do you think she likes Rose? And right away? She saw what Rose would do for you, what she could be, and the TARDIS helped. There's a reason why she was able to hold onto the Vortex for so long without dying, you know."

"Yes, well, now she won't wake up," he replied with some bitterness. "Whatever the plan was, I think it's gone a bit wrong."

River folded her arms across her chest. "You know what you have to do, now stop being a coward and do it."

"That's a violation," he told her, but the anger had gone out of his voice. He sounded exhausted and drained, like he'd been put through the washer and then wrung out to dry.

"The universe is giving you something precious, Doctor," she responded. "Don't waste it." She turned on her heel and left.
He remained where he was for a long moment, listening to the soft thud of her boots on the floor move further and further away. She was right. He hated to admit it—that someone he knew almost nothing about was right, but it was true. If Rose didn't wake up soon then it was unlikely that she ever would. The human mind was so terribly delicate, and every minute he waited neural pathways were forming, adapting to her state of perpetual unconsciousness. Soon her body would begin to shut down. He could keep her alive, hook her up to machines and force her heart to keep beating—but it wouldn't be Rose. It would be a shell, a husk. The woman he loved would be gone.

And that decided him. He knew that he could live without her, that he could eventually (maybe three or four centuries in) be okay, but he'd made his choice the day she came back. He would not be without her. The Doctor and Rose Tyler in the TARDIS—that was how it should be, and if he had a way to make it so he couldn't afford to not use it. The Doctor took a deep breath and set his fingertips against her temples.

He was pulled into her mind almost immediately. He knew that Rose could hear the TARDIS, could hear the Ood as well, which meant that she was more than a bit telepathic but he hadn't expected the draw of her presence to be so strong. Of course, it could be that he was simply underestimating how lonely it was inside his head. It had been so long since he'd had any company and Time Lords weren't exactly built to be isolated, not from each other, anyway. Before the war, there'd always been a bit of a hum, just a reminder that even though he was millions of miles away from Gallifrey, he was never alone—even when he'd wished that he was.

The Doctor wrenched his mind away from melancholy meanderings, and back to the task at hand. Rose. He needed to find Rose. He was on the threshold, not exactly part of her consciousness. He paused for a moment to double-check his barriers, and then took the last step.

He blinked. Well, the psychic manifestation of himself blinked, and then his lips curved into a smile. He was standing in the TARDIS console room. *Imagine somewhere safe*, he'd told Rose when they were setting up her barriers. *The safest place you can, somewhere that you know you will never be harmed*. The knowing was important. It had to be instinctual or the walls would be weakened. In the mind trust, faith, belief, were vital. It gave him a bit of a thrill to realize that the ship was really and truly her home, even after almost eighteen decades apart.

He squared his shoulders, and walked across the metal grating. Like the actual console room there was a hallway opposite the door. No more dawdling about—it was time to find her. *Give her back to me*, he thought, and began to call her name.

Sarah Jane stood and stretched. "Well, ladies, I'm off to bed. River was right about exhaustion and adrenaline."

Jenny stood up and hugged the other woman. "It was good to meet you, Sarah Jane. Mum and Dad told me stories, but they don't compare to the real thing."

"I see you've picked up your mum's good manners," the older woman remarked dryly. "Oh, but it's still odd to call her that. You and Rose look like you could be the same age."

"Are you off to bed as well?" Gwen asked after Sarah Jane had disappeared into the depths of the TARDIS.

Jenny shook her head. "Don't sleep much, me. 'S a Time Lord thing, apparently." She collected the empty mugs on the table and set them in the sink. "Think I'll take Dad a cuppa." She checked a strange looking watch on her left wrist. "I've got to be going soon. Can't stay too long or I'll bugger
up the time line, and *that* is not something you want to deal with."

Gwen stood. "I'll go with you." She glanced around. "Honestly, this ship is a bit—unnerving."

The ginger girl laughed. "She's sentient, the TARDIS. Takes a bit of getting used to, I know." She laid a hand on the wall fondly, and was it Gwen's imagination or the pitch of the ever-present hum shift up a few degrees?

The Welsh woman shook her head. "I don't think I'm ever going to get used to this," she commented as Jenny poured another mug of tea and added three heaping spoonfuls of sugar and a splash of milk. "He likes it sweet."

Jenny nodded. "Disgusting, if you ask me, but apparently this him has a bit of a sweet tooth."

"Are you going to stay until Rose wakes up?" Gwen asked as they wandered down the hallway. Jenny seemed to know where they were going, and that was good enough for her.

"From my perspective, she's already awake," Jenny replied.

Gwen sighed. "This whole time travel bit is giving me a headache."

Jenny laughed. "Give it a few years, and don't try to talk about it with my father. English doesn't have enough tenses to adequately describe events that happen during time travel." She stopped outside a plain white door with a green moon inscribed at approximately eye-level. Gwen frowned. Jenny noticed. "It's sort of like the red cross, only the universal version," she explained. "Like the universal color code for 'danger!' isn't red, it's mauve. According to the rest of the universe, red is 'camp.'"

"Like I said," Gwen replied. "Never getting used to this."

He'd been wandering down the labyrinthine corridors of Rose's mind for what felt like forever. He knew that it couldn't have been long—time moved differently where he was, where they were—but it was beginning to wear on him. He'd had a few false starts, and in any other situation he would say that it was good for her to have defenses, but now speed was the priority. He needed to find her. He needed her to open her eyes and give him that smile, the one with her tongue poking out. He needed her to take his hand and promise that she wasn't going to leave him, not ever. Blimey, when had he become so dependent on a human woman?

When she looked at you and despite everything you've done, she still saw a hero, his brain answered. She still saw someone worth believing in, someone she could love. She made him new.

She could always find him—in the TARDIS, on alien planets, even in his head or when he was unconscious. All she had to do was call out to him, and he was there. He focused on that, on the way he loved her, the deep and abiding warmth that suffused him whenever she was near, the way her smile made his hearts race. The twisting hallways seemed to shimmer for a moment, and then the lights flickered down the one on his left. He turned towards it and followed the smooth coral walls to a door. That there was a door was not unusual—both sides of every hallway were lined with them. They were largely made from a smooth, dark wood, but this one was different. It was larger, and covered in the writing of his people. Over and over 'Bad Wolf' swirled across the rough surface. She was close. He could *feel* her. The Doctor tensed, and pushed against it. The door didn't open, but he passed through.

Behind it was chaos. Twin suns hung in a burnt orange sky that was clouded with thick, black
smoke. Fields of red grass were burning and twisted wrecks of Dalek saucers littered the scorched earth. The air reeked of hot metal and burning flesh and ash. Overlooking the carnage, perched between the mountains of Solace and Solitude was the Citadel of the Time Lords—Gallifrey's greatest city, the seat of power for the whole universe. The glass dome was cracked and broken. Its buildings were crumbling, reduced almost to ruins. The Academy was gone but the Panopticon still loomed. It rose from the rubble, proud and arrogant like its creators, watching over the madness of the war.

Gallifrey was burning. Time was twisting, mutating, rising up against them. Every attempt to correct the course of the battles spawned new horrors. Time Lords and Ladies fought and died only to be pulled back into the battle by their fellows and forced to fight again. It was a charnel house that warped everything it touched. Gone were thoughts of victory, now the modus operandi was survival—at any cost.

He found her wandering amidst the broken buildings of what had been Gallifrey's Capitol. "Rose!" he cried urgently and ran to her.

She didn't look up, didn't acknowledge him at all. She was staring at the body of a child, a little boy. His eyes were wide with surprise or fear, and there wasn't a mark on him. There never was with Dalek weapons. "I saw it," she murmured. Her voice was flat, empty. "When I sent them back. I saw this." She gestured to the destruction around them.

"It isn't real," he told her. "None of this is real. It's a memory, Rose, just a memory."

"It looks real," she said, and took his hand. "It feels real." She turned to face him and slid her free hand up his chest to cup his cheek tenderly. "How do you carry it all, Doctor? The weight of it, of us, how do you keep it from crushing you?"

He covered her hand with his own. "You," he whispered, his voice rough. "You showed me how to live again, Rose, and I need you to come with me, now. I need you to leave this place behind."

She looked up at him, brown eyes wide and trusting and he was rocked once more by the sheer amount of faith she had in him. "How?"

"Just let go," he told her. "Let go of this. You don't belong here, Rose. This, all of this, it's gone. Let it go."

Jenny paused in the doorway. The Doctor stood by Rose's bed. His eyes were closed and his fingertips rested lightly against her temples. He was completely still. From where she and Gwen were standing it didn't even look like he was breathing. Then something shifted. His chest expanded and his eyes flickered open, like he was waking up from a long, deep sleep. A soft sigh drifted through the air. Jenny realized that he was staring down at Rose. Her eyes were open, and she regarded him with a sort of joyful amusement.

"Hello," she said softly and held her arms out to him.

"Hello," he replied as a heart-stopping smile spread over his face. And then he swept her up into his arms and held her tightly against him. "You came back. Rose Tyler, you fantastic, amazing, brilliant woman—you came back."
Predictably, shortly after the Doctor managed to convince himself that yes, Rose was fine and yes, she was going nowhere, his exuberant joy turned to puzzlement. He poked and he prodded and he scanned Rose, looking for something, anything, that could tell him what was going on. It was times like these that Jenny thought her mother must be a saint. If she had someone fussing at her as much as the Doctor was, she'd have knocked him out and tied him to a chair just to get a little peace! Finally, though, after four hours of sitting through test after test after test, Rose had had enough.

The Doctor approached her with a needle (just another vial of blood—never mind that he'd already drawn two before) and she crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. "No," she said quite distinctly.

He blinked. "What?"

"I said," she repeated, "no. No more tests, not now anyway."

He frowned. "Rose,"

"Don't 'Rose' me, Doctor," she replied firmly. "Martha said that I'm healthy as a horse and none of your tests have contradicted that."

He scratched the back of his neck. "Well, no, not as such, but—"

"But?" she encouraged him.

He sighed. "But we still don't know how or what happened. What you did was impossible, Rose."

"So was coming back from Pete's World," she reminded him. "And here I am."

The Doctor turned away from her and ran a hand through his unruly hair. She slid off of the examining bed, grabbed his shoulder, and tugged. Obediently he shifted around to face her. His expression was blank, closed off. She hated when he looked like that, when he retreated back into himself. It was hard on him, not knowing. He was so used to being the cleverest one in the room, to having the knowledge of the universe at his fingertips that when he ran up against something he couldn't examine, couldn't pick apart and find out how it worked he was lost. She pulled him into a tight hug. His arms folded around her tenderly and he rested his cheek on the top of her head.

"What if it kills you?" he murmured. "I saw the door, Rose. It's still there—that link to the Vortex. I can't take it out of you. It's wormed its way into the fibers of your being. Humans aren't meant to interact with the Vortex like that—not even Time Lords can hold it without regenerating. The only creature I've ever known to channel it is the TARDIS and I can't even begin to understand how she works."

"I knew all that babble about 'temporal mechanics' was rubbish," Rose told his lapel.

He snorted softly. "That rubbish keeps us in flight. But the TARDIS—she's alien, really and truly
alien. She perceives reality in a completely different way that you or I. She exists in the Vortex, she needs it to live. I have no idea how to translate what the two of you did."

"We came back to you," she replied.

They were silent for a long moment. He held her to him tightly, drawing comfort from her physical presence. "I don't remember the unknown being so terrifying," he said at last.

"We'll figure it out," she murmured in response. "S what you do, yeah? 'Cause you're so clever."

He pressed a kiss into her hair. "Yeah."

Jenny sighed. She couldn't put it off any longer. Her presence was warping the time lines—she could feel them stretching taut around her. She found her mum and dad sitting in the library. The others were out—Jack was showing River, Sarah Jane, and Luke around the Hub, Martha was catching up with Ianto and Gwen, and Donna and Lee had gone to get coffee. Rose and the Doctor were curled up around each other on one of the many love-seats that littered the winding library space. It was—odd. She'd been to libraries before. Most of them were vast temples to knowledge, designed to make the visitor feel small, to remind them of their supplicant status. The Doctor's library was nothing like that. It was packed with shelves—they lined the walls and book cases stood out at strange angles. It was more like a labyrinth than a library, if Jenny was being honest. Every so often the path would open up to a cosy alcove. The space that her parents found even had a fireplace. If it wasn't safe the Doctor wouldn't have allowed it, but Jenny still thought it was strange to keep fire close to things that burned so easily.

She cleared her throat and they glanced up at her. The Doctor smiled. "Hello there."

"Hi Dad," she replied shyly. "Mum." Rose waved at her to come closer, but she shook her head. "I've got to go."

His face fell. "But, but you only just got here."

She nodded. "I know, but if I stay too long the time lines will snap. You can feel it." He frowned, but didn't argue. She knew that he could and she knew he'd been ignoring it. "You'll find me again, you know," she told them. "I always thought it was odd—when I found you, you knew me right away. You didn't seem surprised at all."

"Time travel," he agreed. He stood, and gave her a hug. She closed her eyes, trying to fix this moment in her memory. She loved her father whatever face he wore, but this was the first. This was the man who'd brought her into the world. He pulled back, and let Rose step forward to hug their daughter.

"We'll see you soon," the blond woman whispered.

Jenny smiled. "Yeah."

Rose called Donna so that she could say goodbye to Jenny before the ginger girl left. "Don't be a stranger," the older woman admonished before she hugged Jenny tightly. "And you keep those parents of yours in line."

Jenny grinned back. "Always. I'm the voice of reason."

The Doctor cleared his throat. "We are standing right here."
River was inputting the coordinates on her stolen Vortex Manipulator. Jenny had her own, but River insisted on taking her, citing an invitation to drop by. "I've got an expedition to plan," she told them. "Can't put it off forever, much as I'd like to. Archeology is brilliant, but the logistics are enough to drive you mad." She sighed longingly. "I miss the days when you could swagger into a tomb with three assistants and just your wits; now you've got to have permits and support staff and insurance." She sniffed. "Nothing is sacred anymore." If she noticed that Rose was a bit paler than she had been, or that the Doctor had gone quiet, she didn't say anything. The two women bid everyone a cheery farewell, and then vanished.

"D'you think?" Rose asked the Doctor.

He nodded. "It's the Library."

Donna winced. "You mean—she's going off to die?"

"Not now," he told her. "But soon, yes."

Jack looked confused. "What?"

"River Song is a time traveler," Rose said quietly. "But we're traveling in opposite directions, or something like that."

"Different time streams," the Doctor clarified.

"Right," Rose continued. "We keep meeting her out of order, but the next place she's going is a planet called The Library and—and—she's going to die. That's how we met her."

"She saved our lives," the Doctor said softly. "She saved 4022 people."

"She would have said it was worth it," Jack told them. The Doctor looked like he wanted to disagree, but Jack held up his hand. "The Dr. Song I know is a hell of a woman. She's got some quirks—loves a good explosion—but she's a good person, one of the best I've met. She would say it's a good death."

The Doctor snorted. "There's no such thing."

"I dunno." Rose looked thoughtful. "There're some that are better than others." She glanced to Jack, who nodded. The Doctor might never understand, but she counted dying for him a good death, not that she wanted to die. Far from it, but if she was going to trade her life in, she wanted it to mean something. She wanted her life to have meant something, and while he would probably never understand, Rose knew that she counted his life much more precious than her own. Jack understood. He couldn't stay dead, but he knew about death. He'd seen people sacrifice for centuries. He'd done it himself. Even if his death wasn't permanent it was still painful, and there were some deaths that he valued more than others.

It seemed that Jenny and River had sparked a wave of goodbyes. After Martha repeated the Doctor's original exam and declared Rose to be whole and healthy the little group began to disperse. Sarah Jane and Luke needed to get back to Ealing, and to their friends and fellow alien-stopping world-savers and Martha needed to go demonstrate to her mum that she was alive, and talk to UNIT about dismantling the Osterhagen system. The Doctor shuddered. If someone managed to infiltrate UNIT, and the Sontarans proved that it was possible, the Österhagen system could hold the whole world
hostage.

The Doctor, as the only person in possession of a time-and-space ship, was roped into ferrying his friends around. He made a show of being put-out, but Rose could tell that he was genuinely reluctant to break up the group. For the millionth time she made a mental note to pester him into visiting more often. She’d heard his reasoning as to why he chose to isolate himself, but really, it was all a load of bollocks. He was surrounded by people who loved him and she could watch him whirl around the TARDIS explaining the intricacies of temporal mechanics to a bemused looking Sarah Jane and scolding a thoroughly unrepentant Jack Harkness (for flirting with the TARDIS) all day.

In fact, it was Sarah Jane who put it best. Just before she opened the TARDIS door on what the scanner verified was her yard, she turned back to the Doctor, and said, "you act like such a lonely man, but you've got the biggest family on the planet."

He paused for a moment, and then he smiled at her. "Yeah," he replied. "I guess you're right."

Martha's farewell was also heartfelt, but a bit more reserved. After all, she was going to be part of the clean-up crew. The Doctor saved the world, the universe, really, but he didn't stay. Still, she left with a hug, and a promise to make sure the Osterhagen system would be dismantled for good.

Donna found them again as evening approached. Rose was holding firm on her 'no tests' rule and the Doctor was doing his best to obey her wishes, although the ginger woman could see his fingers twitch every time they strayed close to the sonic screwdriver—which was several times a minute. She had to admit that she was still a little unnerved by the events of the day. What had happened on the Crucible was intense, even by their standards. After all, it wasn't every day that one of your best friends channeled the latent power of the universe. The Doctor had told her what Rose did when she first traveled with him, how she'd broken open the TARDIS and absorbed what he called the "Time Vortex" in order to save him from the Dalek Emperor. *There's no force in the universe greater than Time*, he'd said, and after what she'd seen Donna was willing to believe him.

But really, watching the two of them together—it was hard to reconcile the image of them, domestic, playful, and so completely and utterly *normal* with the image of the two of them standing on a hill watching Pompeii burn, or facing down a government that was determined to sacrifice thousands of children in order to save face, or bathed in the light of the Vortex. They were cooking—Rose was slicing vegetables for a stir-fry, pausing every few minutes to scold the Doctor for stealing a bit of green pepper. He denied the accusation, of course, and was the picture of innocence—until he did it again.

Rose glanced up and saw the other woman standing in the doorway. She smiled. "Hello Donna. Are you and Lee joining us for dinner?"

"Oh, yes, Lee!" the Doctor exclaimed. "We haven't had time for a proper chat yet, have we? You should bring him around."

Donna laughed. "I don't think he'd be able to get a word in edgewise with you, spaceman," she teased him. He appeared greatly offended, but then grinned at her. "And anyway, I think we need some time with just the two of us, and so do you." She pulled out a pen and marked a date on the calendar that hung on the wall of the kitchen. The Doctor was always complaining about it—said it made the TARDIS too 'domestic'—but it was absolutely essential. How else were they supposed to keep track of the time line? He didn't bother, said he could always tell when it was, but Rose and Donna were just a little suspicious of his driving. They thought it was good to have a reminder in place, just in case. "Come back and get me in three days," the ginger woman instructed. "Now shoo! I think you two have earned a rest."
The Doctor snapped to attention. "Yes Ma'am."

She pointed at him. "Don't get smart with me, Martian boy. And that's three days, not three months, and certainly not three years!"

"We'll be there," Rose promised, and gave her a hug. "Good luck, and have fun."

"So," she asked the Doctor after Donna and Lee vacated the TARDIS, "what d'you want to do?"

He made a show of pondering, and then a grin spread slowly across his face. "Oh, I don't know. Fancy an adventure?" he asked far too casually to be serious.

Rose pursed her lips. "We-ell," she replied slowly. "I suppose I could fit an adventure into my busy schedule. A small one, mind you." She brandished a finger at him. "No huge, world-saving crises. Those always seem to impact your driving skills."

"Oi!" he exclaimed. "My driving is perfect!"

"Twelve months, Doctor," she reminded him.

He sighed. "I'm never going to live that down, am I."

Rose smiled at him, her tongue between her teeth. She knew perfectly well that he thought it was adorable. "Nope!"

He waved a hand at her. "Off with you, then. Dress for winter, in the mid 1850's. The Wardrobe should have something on the third floor, fifth rack."
Cardiff was in chaos. People were taking to the streets—but not to riot, like they had when the Daleks had pulled the Earth out of its orbit and across the universe. There was music and dancing and overwhelming, exuberant joy. People were out in full force celebrating being alive. Predictably the pubs were packed, even Jack’s favorite: a tiny place in a quiet part of town. He signaled the bartender, a pretty redhead with a no-nonsense attitude and a mean right hook (he'd seen her use it on men who didn't understand what 'no' meant). She slid him two beers with a grin. He'd been there often enough that the staff knew him. He liked it that way. They didn't ask questions (not beyond the superficial ones, anyway) and they let him be. Although—she did eye Mickey appreciatively, so maybe he'd get some interesting questions the next time he popped in.

Mickey eyed the drink. Jack waved his hand. "Go on," he told the other man. "You deserve it."

"Thought you were goin' to set me up with an identity an' all that," Mickey replied, but he took the beer.

Jack shrugged. "That can wait until tomorrow. We just saved the multiverse, I think we're allowed a day off." They would think about the messy details in the morning (after the hangover had subsided, of course), because sometimes he felt like a hero but most of the time he felt like the universe's janitor and he wanted to enjoy the afterglow of their actions for just a little while longer.

Mickey took a long drink. "A day off," he repeated with a bit of a laugh. "Man, you never worked with Rose."

"What?" Jack blinked.

"Dunno how she is now," he mused. "Two-hundred and four years old, bloody hell—but she lived and breathed that dimension cannon project. When Pete refused to let her be the one to test the prototype I thought she was going to murder me."

Jack took a long drink. That didn't sound like the Rose he knew—well, he'd known, anyway. He'd lost her before Mickey had, after all, and she'd changed in the time she spent in Pete's World. She'd always been so happy, but there was steel in her too. He'd seen it when she argued with the Doctor. He'd known better than to get in the middle of those fights, when they would rage at each other. The Doctor was almost a thousand years old and had seen and done things that would have reduced Jack to jelly and he stood with the sheer force of his age and his anger gathered around him like a cloak, but Rose brushed that aside like it was cobwebs. She may have been young, but she was bright and burning like a flash fire and her own anger was just as hot. And usually it was the Doctor who backed down.

Mickey set his glass, now empty, on the smooth surface of the bar. "Still, worked out for the best." He made a face. "Although, not sure how much I like the idea of staying in this universe." He laughed, but it was bitter. "I guess I know how she felt—a bit, anyway."
"I'm sorry," Jack said quietly, because the universe never would and someone should, and was that why the Doctor said it so often? Because he knew that too many good people never got apologies when something bad happened to them?

The other man shook his head. "S'not your fault. M'not leavin' anyone behind, not really anyway. My gran's dead—died in her sleep all peaceful-like. Spent her last years livin' in a mansion, an' Rose is right here. Didn't have a girlfriend, not yet, anway." He smiled wistfully. "There was a girl I was seeing—Toshiko Sato. Computer genius, really. She made me look like a clumsy idiot. She was beautiful too, an' shy. I liked her, I liked her a lot." He paused. "I wonder if she'll go to my funeral. Y'think Rose would know?"

Jack didn't hear him. He'd understood intellectually that parallel universes could contain alternate versions of people from his own universe, but he'd never been confronted with the reality of the situation before. There was another Toshiko Sato, alive and well in a different universe. The thought reassured him somehow, even as it brought the old guilt swelling up again. She'd died because of him, because of Gray and his madness—but not completely. He wondered if that was how the Doctor felt when he lost Rose (well, maybe not quite). It hurt like hell, but some part of her survived, and that was good. Saving the world made him maudlin, he thought, and took another drink.

"Anyone in there?" Mickey asked and waved a hand in front of his face. Jack raised an eyebrow. "I said, d'you think—oh, never mind."

"I'll do just that, then," he replied, and raised his hand to signal the bartender. "Now, let's get good and drunk."

The wind was cold, the sun was high and bright, and London was as vivacious and bustling in 1851 as it ever was in 2008 as Rose and the Doctor wandered through the streets. Children laughed and ran around them, ducking and weaving through the crowd. A soberly-dressed policeman tipped his hat to them and Rose smiled in return. Merchants and street-sellers shouted out their wares as fluffy white flakes of snow drifted in the breeze. Her eyes were everywhere, and as usual, his eyes were on her. The Doctor always watched her, especially when she wasn't looking. In the beginning he'd enjoyed the look of wonder that spread across her face; the force of her innocent amazement reminded him that there was more to life than death and destruction and the aftershocks of a war that never was. After a while he'd come to care for her, to love her, and he found himself watching her for the sheer pleasure her presence brought. He learned her with his eyes just as he did with his other senses, catalogued her expressions and set up a little book in his brain devoted to understanding Rose Tyler, a feat he never believed he would fully accomplish, but he would try. After the Master and her return from Pete's World he watched her with a strange sort of desperation, as if she would disappear when he wasn't looking.

The fear had resolved itself, although it reared its ugly head after her actions on the Crucible. She had shown him so much, taught him so much. He loved her for that, and he was terrified that the universe, seeing that he was happy, damn it, would take her from him. It was the sort of thing that the universe was known to do. She was walking with her arms through his in the style of the time and he was pulled back for a moment to another life, when he walked arm-in-arm with another remarkable woman who traveled to parallel universes and existed in a state of paradox—but then she smiled at him and the ghosts of Christmas past drifted away on the wind.

"So," he asked, "is this a good date? Bang on and no trouble at all." He puffed out his chest just a bit. "I am brilliant, if I do say so myself."

Rose flashed him a cheeky, tongue-touched grin. "Think I'll reserve judgment until the end of the night, Doctor."
He looked offended. "I take you to Christmas eve, 1851, Rose Tyler, and you mock me for it?"

She laughed. "You an' trouble, Doctor. Can't go anywhere without it."

He pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. "I promised you a day without trouble, and that's what you're getting."

"Doctor!" a woman's shout echoed through the air. "Doctor!"

His head snapped up as he triangulated the shouter's position from the way the sound echoed off the buildings around them—superior hearing, and all that—but he remained still. Rose could feel him fairly vibrate with energy, though, and she sighed. She pulled her arm out from his, found his hand, and laced their fingers together. "Come on, then," she said, resigned. "Let's go see who needs your help this time."

The person in question turned out to be a young black woman. She was standing in front of a pair of huge iron doors. They shook periodically, as if something very large and very heavy was running into them. "Okay!" the Doctor yelled as he skidded to a stop in front of the woman. "I've got it now. Whatever's in there I think you should get out of here."

The woman, however, appeared to be ignoring him. "Doctor!" she yelled again.

"Blimey," he said and winced. "She can yell louder than your mum!"

"Oi!" Rose snapped, but her smile took the heat from her voice. "You love my mum, don't deny it."

"Who the hell are you two?" the black woman demanded.

"I'm the Doctor," he asserted.

"Don't be stupid," she scoffed.

He frowned. "No, I am, and this is Rose."

"Hello," she said with a wave. The doors shuddered again.

The black woman was having none of it. "Oh, there can't be two of you!" she exclaimed. She glanced past Rose and her whole face lit up. "About time!" she yelled. "Where have you been, then?"

A well-dressed gentleman loped out from a nearby alley. "All right, all right, stand back now," he ordered.

"Hold on," the Doctor objected. "Who are you?"

The new man turned to glare at him. "I'm the Doctor, sir, simply 'the Doctor:' the one, the only, the best." He winked at Rose and held out his hand. "Rosita, give me the sonic screwdriver."

The black woman, presumably Rosita, rummaged around in a pouch tied around her waist and procured what looked to be a normal, wooden-handled screwdriver.

"What?" the Doctor objected.

The other Doctor held out his hand again, and gestured at Rose. "If you and the lovely lady could please step back, sir," he directed them. "This is a job for a Time Lord."
"What?" seemed to be the only thing Rose's Doctor was capable of saying, but he complied.

"Is that a past you?" Rose asked in a whisper.

"No!" he whispered back. "Definitely not. I'd remember that jacket and that hair. No, this isn't a past me—but it could be a future me."

She glanced around. "But then—where am I, Doctor?" She grabbed his arm. "You're not going to leave me again, are you? I thought we were over that!"

"I will never leave you, Rose Tyler," he said softly. "But someday you'll leave me."

"Oh," she said, like she'd been punched in the stomach.

"Oh, he agreed."

"Look, if you two aren't going to help could you clear off?" Rosita asked with a great deal of irritation.

The Doctor was about to respond with something suitably witty when the metal doors burst open. The thing that sauntered into the street looked like some sort of cross between a cyberman and a dog. The two Doctors' responses were almost identical as they cooed over the shiny new monster. Rose and Rosita were not amused. Nor, it would seem, was the cyberthing.

After the thing was vanquished (well, the Doctor would have said vanquished. Rose would have said escaped. Perhaps they could have vanquished it, had she and Rosita not been required to save both Doctors' respective lives when they employed their traditional lack-of-plan) the man claiming to be the Doctor offered his thanks and asked for introductions.

"I'm a doctor too," Rose's Doctor offered. 'Dr. John Tyler at your service, and this is my wife Rose."

"Should I?" the new Doctor asked.

Rose stepped forward. "Doctor," she ventured, and laid a palm against his cheek. "Don't you remember me?"

He flinched away from her touch and she withdrew her hand as if she'd been burned. "I'm sorry, madame," he said quietly, "but we've never met before."

"That's not true," she asserted. Her voice was level but the heartache was plain as day. "That's really not true."

Rosita returned with what was left of the rope. "Been hunting that thing for a fortnight, we have," she grumbled. "Got to go get all the traps now, for all the good they've done."

"Well," the new Doctor took advantage of her appearance to change the subject. "You've met Rosita, my faithful companion." He smiled at the black woman. "She's always telling me off."

Rose's Doctor squeezed her hand. "They do that, don't they," he replied with a fond look at the woman next to him.

Rosita was not impressed. "We've only got twenty minutes until the funeral," she told the new Doctor and stalked off to complete her tasks.

"Funeral?" Rose's Doctor inquired.
"Oh, it's a long story," the new Doctor replied as he stretched. He went to bend his back and winced. "Not as young as I thought."

"No," Rose's Doctor mused. "No you're not."

"And you two, how do you know me?" he continued. "I would swear I've never set eyes on either of you in any of my lives."

Rose folded her arms across her chest. "I think you've got a few memories missing, Doctor."

He fixed his eyes on her, suddenly serious. "How do you know that?"

Her face softened just a bit. "You've forgotten me."

"And me," her Doctor added. "Strange, that. You don't forget your companions, Doctor, not any of them."

The new Doctor smiled softly. "No—they're all I ever remember." The fond expression drained from his face. "Great swathes of my life have been stolen away. When I turn my mind to the past—there's nothing."

Roses Doctor frowned. "Going how far back?"

"Since the cybermen," the new Doctor confided. "Old enemies of mine. You won't believe this, Dr. Tyler," he continued, "but they are creatures from another world."

"Really?" He tried to sound surprised when he answered the new Doctor, but he failed. Rose elbowed him and he yelped.

Thankfully the new Doctor seemed to be impervious to sarcasm. "It is said they fell on London town out of the sky in a blaze of light." He paused and his eyes unfocused. "And they found me." His voice shifted, like he was no longer talking to them, but to himself. "Something was taken," he murmured, "and something was lost." Then he seemed to shake off the memory and looked at them, eyes bright and curious. "What was I like—in the past?"

"Well, I don't think I should say, actually," Rose's Doctor replied with a frown. "Gotta be careful with memory loss—one wrong word..."

"It is strange, though," the new Doctor murmured as he studied them. "I talk of cybermen from the stars—and you don't blink, Dr. Tyler."

"We were your companions," Rose asserted quietly. "We've seen worse. And—we've seen cybermen before."

The new Doctor raised an eyebrow. "Really? When—oh! The funeral! The funeral is at two o'clock!" He gave them a short little bow. "It was a pleasure to meet you two, but please don't breathe a word of it!"

"Can't we come with you?" Rose's Doctor implored.

The new Doctor shook his head. "It's far too dangerous, but rest assured I shall keep this city safe! Oh, and merry Christmas to you both." Then he dashed off down the alley.

"Aren't we going to follow?" Rose asked.

"Of course we are," the Doctor said, and looked at her like she'd dribbled on her shirt. He didn't do it
nearly as often as he had in his ninth body, but it still surfaced every-so-often. "But there's something wrong here, Rose. I can feel it."

Rose Tyler was not happy. Their 'date' had, as usual, turned into Rose-and-the-Doctor-save-the-world-or-at-least-a-city, which wasn't exactly unusual. Running into another version of the Doctor, however, was, especially as he was from the future and didn't remember either of them. The Doctor, her Doctor, thought that something was wrong. She agreed. She always knew the Doctor, ever since Satellite Five she'd get a sort of tugging sensation behind her bellybutton, like he was planet and his gravity was pulling her in. She'd felt it when she ran into him in the wrong order after she managed to claw her way back into the proper universe, she'd felt it with the old man and the clown in the technicolored coat and even the scarf-wearing curly-haired maniac—but not with this Doctor. She felt nothing from him.

And, instead of helping her Doctor fix this mess she was following Rosita to the TARDIS because the Doctor thought they could cover more ground separately. She snorted. A likely story. He probably just wanted to get himself alone so they could fanboy over the universe together without the women around to inject reality into their cloud castles. She sighed as Rosita turned into a side alley and she followed. She was being unfair, she knew, but the whole situation was putting her on edge. In fact, Rose was so absorbed in her own internal monologue that she almost ran into Rosita, who was waiting for her midway down the alley.

"All right then, why are you followin' me?" the woman demanded. "If you're tryin' to spy on the Doctor you can just turn right around; I'm not tellin' you anything."

Rose held up her hands in what she hoped was a mollifying gesture. "I'm not spying, I promise. The D-John sent me along to make sure you get to the TARDIS alright." She sighed. "Really I think he just wanted to have a bit of alone time with the Doctor. Men. You save their life and then they send you away because it's 'too dangerous.'"

Rosita softened a bit. "Tell me about it. Is he as bad as the Doctor, your fella?"

A smile curved Rose's lips. "Definitely. Doesn't matter how many times I prove I'm perfectly capable of protecting myself, he still feels like he has to swoop in and save the day." She leaned forward conspiratorially. "I think he's got a complex."

Rosita looked puzzled. "A what?"

The slang always got her, Rose realized. Freud hadn't lived yet and the psychobabble that had invaded modern speech didn't exist. "He thinks he's like god—that he can save everyone."

"That's the Doctor, all right," Rosita agreed. "Come on then, TARDIS is this way." She led Rose down a twisting path of alleys and sidestreets until they came to an abandoned stable.

"An' the TARDIS is in here, is it?" Rose asked.

"It's outside," Rosita replied. "But this is where we're staying." She knelt down by the fireplace—cold—and began to set some kindling inside. Rose wandered around the stables. Boxes were stacked haphazardly in one of the stalls. She flipped one open and was confronted with stacks of folded cloth. Clothes. They were boxes of clothes.

"Whose luggage is this?" she asked.

"Some man named Jackson Lake," Rosita replied. She had a fire going and she held her hands out to warm them. "The Doctor figures he was the first bloke to get murdered."
Rose turned back to face her. "The first?"

Rosita nodded. "Aye, the reverend is just the last—it's his funeral that's happening now."

"Is the Doctor attending?" Rose cocked an eyebrow.

"Oh no!" Rosita snorted a laugh. "He's breakin' into his house to see if there's anything to lead him to those cybermen."

"Sounds like the Doctor, all right," Rose agreed. They were silent for a few long minutes, but it was companionable, not strained.

"Were you an' him close then?" Rosita asked finally.

Rose smiled. "Very. He knew things I'd never told anyone before, not even my mum, and I—I'd like to think that I was special." She shrugged. "But we're all special or he wouldn't ask us to come with him. I've never met a future companion—'s a bit odd to see the Doctor runnin' around out there without me."

"If the two of you were so close, why aren't you with 'im?" Rosita wanted to know. "I could sure use a hand. For a genius he isn't half-stupid."

"I expect I'm dead," Rose replied. She struggled to keep her tone light and she thought she may have succeeded. "It's not surprising, really. It's the only way I'd leave him…"

"You're not with him now," the other woman pointed out.

Rose shifted uncomfortably. "We're on holiday, John and I. Bit of a break from it all, you know? But he doesn't even remember me—so no, something happened. Something bad." And that brought an end to the conversation, because they'd both seen enough of the Doctor's life to know that casualties were inevitable.

Back in the Torchwood Hub, Lee brought Donna a cup of tea. She was sitting on one of the battered couches that served occasionally as beds during especially troubled times. He had a flat, but he didn't want to take her back to it; he was sure that the mess would drive her away. She smiled and sipped her tea. He'd always been a little slack with tidying up, but she ran a tight ship.

"So, you travel through time," Lee said after a quiet moment. "With those two—Rose and the Doctor."

"Yeah," Donna agreed and set her mug on the low table in front of her.

"And are the three of you…" he trailed off.

She raised an eyebrow. "Are the three of us what? Out with it!"

"Are you together?" he asked.

Donna gaped at him. "What? No, no no no! Not in a million years!" She frowned. "What's the future like then, if you have to ask that question? Did it look like we're together?"

He held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "No, I was just—I had to ask. It's—different—in the 51st century." He sighed. "There are so many categories now that don't exist when I'm from. Three way relationships aren't uncommon, you know."
She snorted. "Well, Rose is more than welcome to that skinny streak of nothing. I don't understand how she can hug him without getting a papercut. I like something to grab on to."

"Yes," he agreed softly. "I know." His eyes remained fixed on his hands wrapped around the mug. He looked like a lost little boy and she wanted nothing more than to pull him into her arms and comfort him—but she was a little lost herself. She'd almost managed to get over him, to push their synthetic life into the corner of her mind and keep it there. Was that what the Doctor did when Rose was lost? Did he put everything that was their life together in a little box in his head? She'd seen how well that worked out for him.

It was Lee who broke the awkward silence. "What are we, Donna?" he asked quietly. "Because—I really don't know, but it felt real. I feel like I know you, like I know everything about you. I know that you don't get on with your mum, that you never have but you're thick as thieves with your granddad. I know that you can shout for England and that I'll never win an argument with you. I know how you like your tea and which side of the bed you prefer. I know how you look with our children in your arms and your opinions on baby names." He swallowed. "I know how you look spread out beneath me or above me with your hair like a curtain of fire. I know how you taste—I remember, Donna. I remember everything." His voice broke. "It feels real."

"I asked the Doctor that same question, just after the library," she said after a while. "And he told me that if I remember it than it happened, and if I think it's real, than it is." She took his face in her hands and cradled his cheeks in her palms. "It's real to me, Lee," Donna said. "It was always real."
Jackson Lake

Chapter Notes

Nothing you recognize belongs to me! Some dialogue taken from 'The Next Doctor.'

His lips were softer than she remembered and Donna tasted just a hint of cherry; he'd always been a chapstick addict, her Lee. He had at least a dozen of those little tubes and they kept vanishing. She thought maybe the children were hiding them—but there were no children, not really, and no chapstick, and there were memories in her head that never happened. It was wonderful sometimes and other times she felt like she was going mad—but he was here and he was real and he remembered too. She wasn't alone. Not that she'd been alone, exactly, on the TARDIS, but it was different. Rose and the Doctor were a pair and although they never excluded her (except, of course, from things she wanted to be excluded from) she missed being part of a pair, but more specifically, she missed being with Lee. She missed having someone there to catch her. She missed, more than anything, feeling safe. Not being safe, necessarily, but feeling safe.

Donna didn't know when she started crying, but there were tears on her cheeks and she thought she felt them on Lee as well. It was like everything—the fear and confusion and pain and loss and doubt were crashing down on her all over again. Lee broke the kiss and rested his cheek against hers. His stubble prickled but she didn't care; it was one more reassurance that he was here and he was real.

They held each other for a long while in silence, because there were some moments that didn't need words. Eventually Donna's breathing slowed and the steady trickle of tears down her cheeks stopped and Lee's arms loosened around her. He cleared his throat. "So. Where do we go from here?"

Donna pulled back a bit and wiped her eyes. Wordlessly, Lee handed her a handkerchief. She took it with a watery smile. He always carried one; his favorite was a set that the kids bought him for his birthday—she stopped herself. They weren't real. This, now, here, was real. "I don't want to stop travelling yet," she told him. "There's so much out there—if you could see, it Lee." The faint hint of a smile curved her lips and her eyes were distant. "It's amazing." She turned back to him. "You know," Donna began hesitantly, "you could always come with. The Doctor's mad, yeah, but you'll like him, and Rose keeps him firmly in place most of the time."

Lee cupped her face and gave her a tender smile. "If it meant being with you, Donna, I'm sure I'd love it—but I can't. Before I met you, before the Library, I was an accountant with a knack for fixing things but now..." He sighed. "I have responsibilities here. I work for Torchwood and we help people. For once in my life I'm part of something that's bigger than me."

"Yeah." It hurt, a bit, knowing that they were going to be separated after they'd found each other again, but it wasn't permanent. She could never begrudge him the chance to discover what she already had: that the universe is a vast and wonderful place, and that one person can change the course of history. "We should take it slow, anyway. I'm not the same person I was when we met. Cal made me forget about the Doctor and everything I've seen."

He nodded. "I'd like that."

"So," Donna began after a moment. "Where'd you grow up? What's your family like? How'd you decide to be an accountant?"
He told her about his sister and her husband and how they eloped straight out of university, about how his mother used to sing him to sleep and his father would hoist Lee up on his shoulders. He described the way the two moons would rise in the south over his home by the sea, and how small he felt the first time he went off-world. It was strange and beautiful, seeing his blue-green planet against the black velvet of space, and it reminded him how insignificant his single life was against the scale of the universe. Lee talked about growing up in the 51st century, about the holo-vids of what life on earth was supposedly like and how wrong they were, and about his life in the 21st century. His stories from Torchwood were equal parts horrifying and hilarious, and there was such a light in his eyes as he spoke. He had always been good and kind and honest, but here he could be great, could be brave and strong and Donna could never, would never take that away from him.

In return she told him her life, about growing up with her mum and her dad and granddad, about life before the Doctor, about being a temp and living in a world that was myopically focused on her own miniscule existence. She recounted the story of how she first met the Doctor, how he saved her from the Racnoss and how she refused to go with him, how the life that he led (and the friend that he lost) was too much for her. And then she told him how she realized over the next few months that she wanted to be more than what she was, that she wanted to see the universe in all its terror and wonder. She told him how she searched for the Doctor, how she eventually found him again, and how she met the woman he lost.

"You are amazing," he said, his face awash with awe. "I always thought you were, of course, but really, Donna. Look at all that you've done."

She smiled, but shook her head. "I'm nothing special. The Doctor and Rose—he nearly died when he lost her and she spent centuries trying to get back to him. They're—they're like a couple out of some play or poem. They're amazing."

"That's not true." He pulled her close and ran a hand through her long, brilliant red hair. "The Doctor might save the universe, but you saved him. Where would we have been today if he'd never met you?" There was an image that pulled at her, something from the parallel universe. She remembered a stretcher and a road and the sonic screwdriver falling to the pavement. Donna shuddered and pushed it away. Whatever it was, it didn't happen. "You're more organized than I'll ever be," Lee continued, "and you've got the biggest heart under all that shouting. You're the most interesting, amazing woman I've ever met."

It was nearly morning when they finally bothered to look at the clock. "Blimey!" Donna laughed. "I didn't mean to talk your ear off."

"Wasn't just you, love," he answered with a yawn. She snuggled against him. He was warm and solid and comforting—and he made an excellent pillow. He said something about a flat and a bed but she was comfortable where she was, and she murmured something intelligible before sleep claimed her fully. It might have been an assent, or it might have been a rebuttal, but it sounded most like 'I love you.'

Rosita laid another log on the fire and fiddled with the coals, anything, Rose thought, to distract from the suddenly heavy mood. Because it was true—the only way she would leave him now, after she’d fought her way back, was if she died. She wasn't immortal; she could be injured and probably killed as well. Whatever Bad Wolf had done it hadn't made her like Jack, and maybe that was a kindness. She didn't relish the idea of living forever and watching everyone she loved (including the Doctor) die around her. She'd seen far too much of that life already, thank you very much.

"How did you meet the Doctor?" she asked, to break the tension.
Rosita straightened. "I was down by the Osterman's Wharf when one of those things, those men made of metal, attacked. The Doctor saved my life." She raised her chin as if she was daring Rose to find fault with her actions. "There was nothing for me in my old life, and he was all alone. He needed someone to look after him."

"Yeah, he does," Rose agreed. "He's so lonely. He saves the entire universe, but he still needs someone to save him sometimes."

"D'you think your husband can help him?" Rosita asks hesitantly. "He has such terrible dreams. He calls out at night and when he wakes he's in a panic. I try to talk to him about it but he just brushes me off, says it's nothin' to worry about n' that 'of course a Time Lord has horrible dreams.' Rubbish, that's what it is. Complete bollocks."

Rose laid a hand on the younger woman's arm. "We'll try. And John—he's very good." It was so strange, calling the Doctor anything but the Doctor, and she wasn't about to let him forget that this was the third time he'd introduced her as his wife.

"Doctor!" A loud, masculine voice echoed through the stable and Rose jumped.

Rosita rolled her eyes. "He's not here, Jeb!" she called back.

A scruffy young man stepped into the stable proper. Jeb, Rose assumed. His clothes looked to be of middling quality, and he had a hat perched jauntily on his head, which he swept off at the sight of Rosita and folded himself into a deep bow. "Rosita, my love!" he proclaimed grandiosely. "My day is complete." He was handsome, Rose decided, with black hair and blue eyes and a rakish grin that reminded her just a bit of Jack.

Rosita rolled her eyes. "I'm sure. Is it finished?"

Jeb grinned. "The TARDIS is complete, milady. Would you and your lovely friend care to see?"

"Yes!" Rose exclaimed. Ever since Bad Wolf she had been close to the ship. She thought, at first, that she was simply getting used to living in a telepathic, dimensionally transcendant, space and time ship, but when she remembered what had happened, everything she had done—it made sense. There was a bond between them: she had used it on the Crucible to save the TARDIS and she had drawn comfort from it ever since she made her way back into this universe. Even now the TARDIS sang in her head—but it was strange. She had been around multiple TARDIS before (the Doctor never mentioned how close he was to meeting himself) and there was always an echo—except for now.

Rose realized that Rosita and Jeb were looking at her with some confusion. "I mean, if that's alright with you."

Rosita sighed. "Come on, then. Let's see her."

Jeb led them out the stable's back door and into a large, paved courtyard. He gestured grandly for Rose and Rosita to exit first. "The TARDIS," he said proudly. "Just as the Doctor ordered."

A hot air balloon was tethered to an empty hitching-post. It was the exact same shade of blue as the TARDIS and it bobbed and wavered in the wind. "And this is the Doctor's ship?" Rose asked, careful to keep her voice neutral.

"Course it is!" Rosita replied impatiently. "I thought you'd know that, seeing as how you traveled with him before."

"Right, yeah." Rose nodded mechanically. "It was—broken—when John and I met him." Jeb and
Rosita continued their playful banter but Rose was transfixed by the sight in front of her. His screwdriver was made of wood, his TARDIS was a hot air balloon, and he did not know her. That man, whoever he really was, was not the Doctor. But at the same time—he believed that he was. She was always good at picking out liars and this man was not lying, nor did he appear to be dangerous or malicious. The psychic abilities she gained from merging with the TARDIS would have warned her, and the TARDIS herself was placid and content in Rose's mind.

But still—something was rotten in the state of Denmark.

A door slammed in the stable behind them and two voices cut through the cold December air. "Rosita!" the imposter called.

The Doctor stuck his head out through the door. "Rose! What are you doing out here? And what is that?"

"Ah!" The imposter appeared behind the Doctor. "I see you've found my TARDIS."

The Doctor blinked. "That is your TARDIS?"

Rose moved toward him as quickly as she could without arousing suspicion. "Doctor," she murmured. "I need to talk with you—now."

"It is," the imposter replies. "T-A-R-D-I-S, TARDIS, Tethered Aerial Release Developed in Style. Do you see?"

The Doctor nodded. "Yes, I think I do."

"He's not the Doctor!" Rose insisted as the imposter conversed with Jeb and Rosita. "He's not, he can't be, and he's got a dead man's luggage and…"

"What is it?" The Doctor turned to face her. The playfulness she'd glimpsed earlier was gone; it had been replaced by a deep sadness.

"There's an awful lot of luggage for one man. And what's more," she pulled out a thin metal cylinder. "There was one of these in his suitcase. You know something, don't you, Doctor? You know what happened?"

"I have a theory," he confirmed and took the cylinder from her.

She nodded. "It's not good."

A bitter smile twisted his lips for just a moment. "Oh Rose, it never is. Everywhere I go, death follows." He turned away. Jeb was gone—he earlier left clutching the wad of notes that the imposter had given him (one more difference, the Doctor never carried money, hardly paid any attention to it at all). It was just Rosita and the imposter, who was staring off into the distance, his eyes fixed on something only he could see. The girl stood next to him. She looked like she wanted to comfort him but was unsure of how to do so.

"Doctor," the real Doctor called, and the imposter shook himself.

"Yes, Dr. Tyler?" he enquired. The Doctor tossed the infostamp his way. He caught it with ease. "You brought this from the Reverend's house!" the imposter exclaimed.

The Doctor shook his head. "No. Rose found it in Mr. Lake's luggage." He took a deep breath.
"And I'm sorry, I'm so sorry—but I think I know what happened to you, why you lost your memory."

The imposter blinked. "Dr. Tyler, you must tell me!" When the Doctor remained silent he frowned. "Sir, there is nothing I wish to know more, now please—tell me!"

The Doctor regarded him solemnly. "I believe you." He turned back to face Rose and the stable. "Let's go inside. You'll want to sit down."

It was nearly closing time in a small bar in Cardiff, Wales, and Jack Harkness was not remotely drunk. It wasn't for lack of trying—he enjoyed his liquor as much as (probably more than) any other man—but something about his physiology post-Satellite Five rendered alcohol into basically tasty water. Mickey, on the other hand, was completely blitzed. He had one arm slung around Jack's neck and the other waved wildly in the air as he bellowed a rather crass, surprisingly explicit drinking song. It had to be from the alternate universe—Pete's World, as the Doctor called it—because Jack had spent a lot of time in bars during his stint as a Time Agent, and he would have remembered this song. As it is, he committed the lyrics to memory as he weaved the two of them through the densely packed joint. Not that he blamed these people for celebrating; the world nearly ended, after all, and if he could have gotten drunk off his ass he would have.

Mickey was a good deal more muscular than Jack remembered, and he definitely didn't remember the beard. He was strong enough to manhandle Mickey through the press of people (fifty-first century genes and working at Torchwood kept him fighting fit) but he wondered just how much time had passed for the other man in the alternate universe. The Mickey Jack had first met never would have hopped through universes to find the Doctor. He was a good kid, yeah, but still a kid. He wasn't a kid anymore.

Jack paused outside the door of the bar. His flat was closer (and it was strange for him, having a flat after so many years of sleeping in a tiny room beneath the Hub), but he didn't think Ianto would appreciate him bringing another man home, even if it was just to sleep off a hangover on the couch and even if said man had helped to save the multiverse. That left the Hub, because Jack certainly wasn't going to let Mickey wander the streets in his current condition. While the ex-Time Agent had never met Jackie Tyler, he'd heard stories from the Doctor about her slap, and he was willing to bet that it was genetic.

Jack dropped his keys while he tried to open the 'Visitor's Center' entrance and swore softly. Mickey mumbled something from where Jack had propped him against the wall and giggled.

"I'm glad you find this so funny," Jack drawled, and wished it wasn't quite so dark in front of the Hub's back door. He was pretty sure intoxicated Mickey would be a hit on the internet (or at least with Rose and the Doctor). They were using the back door because there was no way in hell he'd risk the other man losing his balance on the lift. It was cool, yeah, but not for the reflex-impaired. "Come on chuckles," he muttered, and pulled Mickey inside.

The Hub was basically deserted. He'd sent Gwen and Ianto home, Ianto with a promise that he wouldn't be too late in joining the other man and Gwen with orders to shag Rhys until they both passed out. Lee had disappeared with Donna after saying something about a library and a computer and teleports. It had all been rather jumbled and disjointed and Jack had been more concerned with making sure everyone was still alive to pay very close attention. He'd lost too many people in the past few months. He groped for the light switch—they were supposed to be motion activated, dammit, but the sensors had gone out months ago and trying to get money for a supposedly defunct government agency wasn't as easy as it sounded.
Jack found the switch eventually and pulled Mickey into the main room. He pointedly ignored the bank of computers with their screens flashing with urgent inquiries from a dozen other agencies and several individuals. He would deal with those later, after UNIT finished their cleanup operation. There were couches set against the wall to make a sort-of sitting room; Mickey could crash on one of them and then he'd be conveniently close to work in the morning. After all, Jack had an employment offer to extend. He was down a computer genius and a doctor, and apparently Mickey was something of a computer genius.

One of the couches was taken. Lee sat with his back against the arm of the couch and his cheek resting on the side. One leg hung off and the other was stretched out along the back. Donna lay against him, her arms around his waist like he was a human-sized teddy bear. One of Lee's hands rested on her back, and the other was tangled in her vibrant red hair and Jack couldn't help but smile. Everyone had found their happy ending: he had Ianto, Gwen had Rhys, Lee had Donna, the Doctor had Rose—and he saw the way that Mickey was looking at Martha. They were both brave, they both saved the world (and maybe the universe), and they were both clever and strong, and deserved someone who could appreciate how special they were. Because they weren't just the stand-in, the second choice. They were amazing.

He shoved Mickey on to the second couch. Mickey grumbled something, but then he flung an arm over the side and started to snore. Jack snagged a pair of blankets from the closet and draped them over the sleepers. "Sweet dreams, kids," he murmured. Then he turned off the lights and headed home. There was a well-dressed Welshman waiting for him, after all, and he had an appointment to keep.

The fire crackled inside the stable, but despite the warmth it gave Rose shivered. Tension was thick in the air. The imposter sat on the floor next to Rosita, his legs crossed and a look of eager expectation on his face. The Doctor perched on a pile of suitcases, and Rose sat next to him, on a suitcase just under his. It made him taller than the rest of them, made him look automatically like he was in charge. He probably didn't even notice he was doing it, but she did. She always did. He used a thousand little tricks to make people trust him and she knew them all. He flipped an infostamp nonchalantly in one hand but the other was wrapped around hers and she could feel the tension pouring off of him in waves. He looked like he was going to a funeral.

"Right," he said after a while. "I suppose I should begin with how Cybermen ended up in Victorian London." Rose squeezed his hand and he smiled at her, though it did not reach his eyes. "A long time from now," he began, "although not really very far from here, there was a battle. These Cybermen aren't from around here, you see, they're from an entirely different universe, one that's parallel to our universe. They were pushing through the walls between the two, trying to cross from that one to this."

"But we beat them," Rose put in. "We sent them into the Void, the space between the worlds."

He nodded. "We did. But then there was an even greater battle. Something was coming from beyond the stars, something that was eating away at the walls between all worlds. We stopped it—but these Cybermen slipped through one of the cracks. Their ship was badly damaged, had to have been, and they fell through time until they landed here—and found you."

"Yes, yes," the imposter waved his hand in dismissal. "I know all of that; I fought them. What happened?"

The Doctor gestured to the luggage around them. "At the same time another man came to London: Mr. Jackson Lake. Plenty of luggage, money in his pocket, coming to town for—I don't know—the winter season, maybe. I dunno." Rose leant into him and lays her head on his shoulder. "He ran into
the Cybermen too, and just like you—*exactly* like you—he took hold of an infostamp. He used it to defeat them."

"Jackson Lake is *dead*," the imposter asserted firmly. "The Cybermen murdered him."

"But no body was found," the Doctor pointed out. "And you kept all his suitcases, but you could never bear to open them—why?" The imposter opened his mouth to reply, but only closed it again. "I told you the answer was in the watch." The Doctor released Rose's hand and held his out. "May I see?"

The imposter relinquished the watch slowly, as if he didn't really want to part with it. The Doctor flipped the watch over to reveal two letters monogrammed on the front. "J,L," he read. "This watch belongs to Jackson Lake."

Rosita started at the imposter. "Jackson Lake—is *you*, sir."

The newly discovered Jackson Lake stared at them. "But," he began, plainly confused and disbelieving. "But I'm the Doctor!"

"D'you know what an infostamp is?" the Doctor asked, seemingly apropos of nothing. "It's a book. I know you're familiar with them; you used one at the Reverend's house to disable the Cyberman that was waiting for us there. You overloaded the core and the concentrated power overloaded his system. I'm betting something like that happened when you first encountered the Cybermen, back when you were Jackson Lake. And this one," he said as he fiddled with the cylinder. "This one is all about the Doctor." The tip of the infostamp flickered, and then images and short video clips flashed on the wall opposite them. Ten different men paraded before them, old and wise and young and mocking and handsome and thin and heavy and blonde and dark and serious and laughing—and Rose knew them all. She'd seen them all, every one of them on her travels. The last face, though, was the face of the man standing next to her. "It's everything you could ever want to know about the Doctor," he continued and shut the stamp off. "Probably stolen from the Daleks."

Jackson was staring. "That's you. *You* are the Doctor."

"That's me," he agreed. "The one and only."

Jackson sat back heavily. There was a look on his face that Rose knew well; she'd seen it on the Doctor a thousand times, and on rare occasions she'd seen it in the mirror. "I am nothing but a lie," he said hollowly.

The Doctor blinked and crouched down in front of Jackson. "No," he replied emphatically. "No, you're not. The infostamp is just information, just *data*. All that bravery and cleverness? That came from you. Saving Rosita, defending Londontown, building the TARDIS—that was *you*."

"There's more." The emptiness was gone, replaced with an aching need, a raw, bleeding desperation. He seized the lapels of the Doctor's suit. "I demand you tell me, sir!" Jackson shouted. "I demand you tell me what they took!"

Rosita pulled him back. "Sir!"

He released the Doctor grudgingly, and the Time Lord held out his hand and drew Rose down next to him. "Rose spotted it straight away," he said sadly.

She covered Jackson's hand with her own. "I'm sorry," she told him, and she was. "I'm so sorry—but it's an awful lot of luggage for one man." She could see the understanding dawning on his face, the horror blooming where anger had so recently resided. "Like the Doctor said—infostamps are just
facts and figures. 'S not enough to make a man lose his mind. What you experienced, it's called a
fugue state. I've seen it happen before." He stared at her, uncomprehending. "It's like—the mind just
runs away. You wanted to be the Doctor, because Jackson Lake had lost so much. You couldn't
stand to be you anymore. I'm sorry," she said again. "I am so, so sorry."

Jackson shrugged her hand off and curled in on himself. He fist ed his hands in his hair and groaned.
"I remember," he choked. "Oh, I remember. Caroline—they killed my wife!"

The infostamp in the Doctor's hand gave off a strange sequence of beeps—and then the tip lit up a
brilliant blue. He peered at it, and then pulled the sonic out.

"Doctor?" Rose asked, and stood. Rosita remained kneeling next to Jackson, who was staring at the
floor of the stable, oblivious to anything but his own pain. "What's going on? What's it doing?"

"It's a signal," he replied and scanned it with the sonic. "A call to arms. The Cybermen are
mobilizing."
Nothing you recognize belongs to me! Some dialogue taken from 'The Next Doctor.'

Martha Jones materialized just outside Cardiff proper. She'd gone home and seen her family, but there was only so much of her mother's questioning and her father's concern that she could stand in one night. Moving to Manhattan had been one of the best things she'd ever done for herself; Martha loved her family but years of being the peace-keeper had worn grooves in her reactions and making new pathways was easiest if she couldn't come running when they called. The end of the world was definitely a reason to go home for a bit, but Jack needed help and everyone was alright: Tish was with her boyfriend (they'd been on a street the Daleks had ignored) and Leo, Shonara, and Keisha had all been over for a visit when it had happened. They'd locked themselves in the basement and they were fine. UNIT was giving her a leave of absence, what with the way she helped save the world and all. So it was back to Cardiff and the Hub, which was where she'd been aiming the teleport, originally, but there was something about the structure that made teleportation in and around it impossible. The Doctor said it had something to do with the metals Torchwood had used during the Hub's construction, but then he went on a bit of a ramble and Martha did what she always did—she tuned him out. If there was one thing that Martha Jones had learned during her time on the TARDIS it was that the Doctor could talk for hours on subjects that she knew nothing about, and that if she let him she would wind up more confused than she was at the beginning.

She walked down the street with Project Indigo still strapped to her back. Signs of last night's chaos and celebration were everywhere. Windows were smashed, broken glass and other detritus littered the ground. Cars were dented and broken and the remains of hastily-set fires were scattered through the city—but daily life continued. There were people beginning to emerge from buildings with brooms and garbage bags and a determined set to their face. Stores were opening and a café across from the Hub on Millennium Plaza looked to be doing brisk business. If she lived to be as old as the Doctor Martha would never cease to be amazed by mankind's ability to adapt and persevere in the strangest and most traumatic circumstances.

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee drifted past her on the cool morning breeze and she joined the other people waiting in line at the café. Her time at Royal Hope Hospital left her with an appreciation for coffee that working for UNIT encouraged. It was a nice change of pace from tea. It was a bit unbritish of her, but she'd never been fond of the beverage. She ordered, paid, and obediently made her way to the pick-up station. The Osterhagen key dug into her thigh as she twisted to avoid another patron. The blasted thing wasn't designed to be shoved into a pocket, no, it was designed to destroy the planet. Martha meant what she told the Doctor: she will make sure the key is decommissioned. It seemed heavier in her pocket than she remembered, and the knowledge of what she had almost done, what she had been prepared to do, if necessary, would keep her awake at nights. No one should be able to make that choice.

A familiar voice drew her away from dark thoughts. Mickey Smith was standing at the counter. She smiled and waved and he joined her at the other end of the café.

" Didn't you go to London?" he asked by way of greeting.
"I did." The barista called her name and Martha took her coffee eagerly. "And now I'm back."

The barista brought Mickey's order over and he fell in step next to Martha as she navigated through the press of people. "I grew up in London," he said after the door closed behind them. "Me an' Rose, on the Powell Estate.'

"That's in south London, yeah?" Martha let the cup warm her cold hands.

"Yeah."

"What was it like?" she asked, mostly to make small talk, but partly because she was curious. Her home life was never easy; her parents' had been fighting for as long as she could remember and they'd divorced when she was young—but she'd never wanted for anything. They'd both had good jobs and her father in particular tried to make up for missed dance recitals and birthdays and parent-teacher conferences with presents. The housing estates might as well have been another planet, for all the experience she'd had with them.

Mickey took a long drink. "It was hard sometimes," he admitted. "Dad left when I was little, mum couldn't handle everything alone. My gran ended up raising me. She was on benefits 'cause she was blind, so we didn't have a lot, but we got by."

"Sounds rough." "Could be," he agreed. "What about you? How'd you wind up involved with this lot?"

"I was studying to be a doctor at Royal Hope Hospital when it ended up on the moon." She took a drink. "It's not exactly the sort of thing you forget. And the Doctor was there. He had this rubbish plan to unmask this plasmavore that was hiding there by letting her drink his blood and assimilate his alienness so the Judoon—basically space-rhino cops—would find her and return the hospital."

Mickey whistled. "Judoon, huh. Nasty bunch, them."

"You're telling me," Martha agreed. "They didn't even care that she'd rigged the MRI to explode! It would have killed half the people on the planet! They just killed the plasmavore and left; the Doctor had to fix the MRI. And it took them bloody ages to get the hospital back where it belonged. We were lucky—no one died. Any longer and people would have started suffocating. After that—" She shrugged. "I saved his life, he offered to take me on a trip as thanks. One trip led to one trip backwards and one trip forwards in time, and eventually I just signed on."

Mickey was quiet for a moment. "Still traveling with him, then?"

Martha laughed. "God, no. I mean—I wouldn't have traded it for anything, but it was never permanent. And I don't need to travel with him to be the best. I'm already the best, all by myself."

"Yeah." He nodded. "Sometimes you have to get out so you can be your own person, without people around who expect you to be who you used to be."

Jack was waiting for them when they returned to the Hub. Donna and Lee were nowhere to be seen, but Ianto was fiddling with something on one of the computer terminals.

"Hello gorgeous," Jack said with a wink.

"Oi," Mickey objected, "are you talkin' to her or me?"

"Are you really going to make me choose?" the other man asked with a pout. Mickey rolled his eyes
but Martha laughed and hugged Jack. "How's everyone?"

"They're good," she replied. "Mum sends her best, and that you're welcome to visit."

"Next time aliens invade London I'll be there," Jack promised dryly. "Now!" He rubbed his hands together. "Let's get down to business. As I was telling Mickey last night, we seem to be short a few people." He gestured at the Hub around them. "And I really can't think of two more qualified individuals for the jobs."

"I already have a job," Martha reminded him.

Jack grinned. "I know. But look at this face. Can you really say no to this beautiful face?"

"No," Mickey said and Martha couldn't keep from smiling as Jack slapped a hand over his heart and did his best to look wounded. "Like I said, been working for Torchwood for more than five years. I thought I'd take a vacation, maybe freelance for a bit."

Jack turned back to Martha and she shook her head. "We'll see, mister."

"That's better than a 'no,' so I can live with that." He picked a steaming mug off the computer terminal and took a long drink. "Now let's get down to business. Mr. Mickey here needs a new identity, seeing as how he's been declared dead."

The Doctor was out the door like a shot. If the Cybermen were active than their plan was coming to a head and if that was the case than he and Rose were out of time. It wasn't supposed to happen like this; they were supposed to go back to 1850 and have a nice, relaxing day. No running, no danger, and certainly no metal men bent on world domination. What was that saying Doris had been fond of —oh yes: men plan, God laughs. Not that he believed in a mythical higher being, but 'men plan, the universe laughs' didn't have the same ring.

Back inside the stables Rose moved to follow the Doctor but Jackson caught her arm. "Wait," he said. "In this story—who are you?"

She quirked an eyebrow. "I'm Rose, like I said. Rose Tyler."

"Yes," Jackson agreed. "But the infostamp contained information on the Doctor's companions. I have no memory of anyone named 'Rose Tyler.' So I ask again, Madame, who are you? Earlier you claimed to be his wife—is that true? Is anything you've told me true?"

"You're looking in the wrong book, mate." Her voice was soft, but there was steel in it. "I was a companion, once, a long time ago. You want to know my story, look under 'Bad Wolf.' Now I've got to go. He's useless on his own." She pulled her arm out of Jackson's grasp and ran after the Doctor.

Jackson remained as if frozen where he stood. His eyes were distant, focused on something that only he could see. Rosita took a hesitant step forward and her proximity seemed to snap him out of his reverie.

"Sir?" she inquired hesitantly.

"Go with them." His voice was rough and his shoulders sagged.

She crossed her arms over her chest. "I'd really rather not, Doctor."

"Jackson," he corrected her. "My name is Jackson Lake. I am not the Doctor."

"Jackson." It felt strange to her, calling him anything other than 'Doctor,' but he wasn't the Doctor, apparently. "I think I should stay with you, sir."

He shook his head. "They are strangers, Rosita. For all of his cleverness, the Doctor is not familiar with our London. They will need your help."

Still, she hesitated. "Sir…"

"Go!" he snapped.

She went.

They didn't get far; they didn't have to. The streets were clogged by a parade of poorly dressed children shepherded along by a distinguished looking man sporting shoulder-length grey hair, something shiny peaking out from his ears. Goosebumps raced down Rose's spine. She recognized the sleek design and flashing blue lights that adorned the devices. It was Lumic's work, all right. Whoever he was, the Cybermen were thinking for him now. A crowd of people had gathered to watch the strange spectacle and Rose and the Doctor pushed through them.

"That's Mr. Cole!" Rosita cried. "He runs the Hazel Street Workhouse."

"Not anymore," the Doctor replied grimly.

Rosita balked. "How do you mean?"

The Doctor remained silent. As Mr. Cole drew abreast of them he reached into his jacket for the sonic screwdriver—and a low, rumbling growl drifted out of the shadows. Something moved in the darkness and lamplight glinted off the copper masks of the strange, animalistic cybershades. They were everywhere. The Doctor let his hand fall. He wouldn't risk a confrontation, not with the children all around. It would be all too easy for one (or more) of them to get hurt.

"They deserve a good whipping," a familiar voice grumbled from behind them. "Lookit 'em all, clogging up the roads. There's another lot from Ingleby Workhouse down Broadback lane too." Jed ambled up, hands in his pockets and a sour frown on his face. "It'll be ages 'for this lot clears off."

Rose frowned. "The Cybermen are controlling workhouse masters," she began, "but why? What could they need that many kids for?"

"They're not just children." The Doctor's face was tight, his eyes hard and bright as he watched the long procession. His whole body was taut as a bowstring. "They're orphaned children—wards of the Church and later the State. They were the first factory workers in the early stages of the Industrial Revolution. No such thing as a childhood for an orphan; they're put to work immediately and that's what they are: a workforce."

"For what?" Rosita's voice was hushed and incredulous.

"No idea," the Doctor replied. "But it's time to find out."

They followed the children down more allies and back roads. Rose prized her sense of direction but the twisting nature of the streets soon had her baffled. Tenements loomed over them on either side and it was like walking at the bottom of a great chasm: claustrophobic. She itched to be out in the open again. Her Torchwood training had her on edge: they were in ambush territory and she wasn't
sure how well her psychokinetic wavelength disruptor would work against the shades—one had to have a mind to be affected, after all.

Along the way other groups of raggedy children joined them, until there was a veritable army of orphans marching through two tall metal doors guarded by Cybermen. The Doctor turned to Rosita and gestured at the scene. "Those doors, where do they go?"

"The sluice," she replied. "All the sewage runs through there, straight to the Thames."

"Brilliant," Rose muttered. "Another sewer." The Doctor flashed her a grin and she rolled her eyes at him. "Seriously, though—top secret base under the Thames?"

"Not as uncommon as you'd think," he responded lightly as he scanned the area for any available back entrance; the front was too crowded and too exposed, no way they'd get past the Cybermen without a fight. "When I first met Donna we ended up in a secret Torchwood base beneath the Thames." He shoved his hands in his pockets and turned away. "We're not getting through there; time to find another way in." They withdrew from the piles of crates where they had been crouched, observing—but there were complications. Two Cybermen were waiting for them as they crept into a side street.

"Oi!" the Doctor exclaimed. "That's cheating. What'd you do, put your legs on silent?" He positioned himself subtly in front of Rose and Rosita, one hand resting on the sonic screwdriver. Rose was poised to run but her psychokinetic wavelength disruptor was solid in her hand, shielded behind the Doctor's back. It would work on Cybermen; the only human bit they had left was a brain.

The Cybermen did not respond. They stood, straight and stiff and silent, blocking the way but not advancing. The Doctor frowned and tilted his head to the side. Something didn't fit. They should be advancing, demanding conversion or death. They should be firing those deadly energy beams.

A woman stepped out of the shadows. She was tall and pale, with long brown hair pulled tightly back from her severely beautiful face in what Rose assumed to be a fashionable style. Her back was bayonette straight and the vibrant red of her dress leant no warmth to her. She surveyed the three in front of her with a clear, deliberate gaze.

"My, my, my," she murmured. "What have we here?"

"Step toward me," the Doctor directed and Rose wondered if he even really saw the woman; his eyes remained fixed on the Cybermen who flanked her. "Don't look behind you, just—come away."

The woman smiled and it was like sunlight reflected off of ice on a winter morning. "Oh, they won't hurt me, not my lovely boys. They're my knights in shining armor—literally."

"That's not a cyberspeech pattern." He was still trying. One of the many things Rose loved about the Doctor was his absolute refusal to give up: on life, on the universe, on a single person. He was the eternal optimist which worked to his advantage, sometimes—and sometimes it broke his heart. "Even if they've started the conversion," he continued, "you've still got free will. I can help you."

Rose put her hand on his arm and he glanced back at her, eyes wide and intent. "I don't think they needed to convert her," Rose pointed out gently.

The woman chuckled and Rose thought of glaciers cracking at the poles. "Quite right," she agreed. "There was not and will not be any conversion."

"Who are you then?" Rose demanded. "Why are you working with the Cybermen?" Before she traveled with the Doctor, before she met Jimmy Stone and she was still in school, Rose had never
been able to understand why some people just stepped back and let others commit atrocities. She never understood the idea of the silent majority, and how far people were willing to go in order to preserve their power or to gain more. But she understood now, after she'd seen it all across the galaxy. Some things never changed, and one of them was that people would get into bed with the devil himself if they thought they could get something out of it.

"I'm the woman in charge. The Cybermen offered me the one thing I wanted—liberation." She raised one sculpted eyebrow and managed to convey a world of scorn. "And who might you be?"

"I'm the Doctor," he replied. "And this is Rose Tyler." Rose gave the woman a sarcastic salute.

"And I'm Rosita," the other woman added, "if anyone's interested."

"You can be quiet," the woman in charge snarled. "I doubt they paid you to talk."

Rosita paled abruptly and looked away. Hot anger surged through Rose's veins. "She's not a prostitute you great bully," she snapped back. "And even if she was, doesn't give you the right to talk to her like that!"

The woman in red ignored her and focused her attention instead on the Doctor. "Who are you, then, with such knowledge of my companions?"

"He rocked back on his heels, his hands shoved into his trouser pockets. "I told you, I'm the Doctor."

"That is not a name," she pressed. "Doctor who?"

"Just the Doctor."

"Negative," one of the Cybermen objected. "You do not match the description of the enemy designated 'the Doctor.'"

"Oh, I know," he agreed. "But your database is corrupted; must have happened in the Void." He pulled his hand out of his pocket and tossed the damaged infostamp to the Cyberman who had spoken. "There you go. Download that and then we'll talk."

The Cyberman examined it. "The core has been damaged. This infostamp would damage cyberunits."

The Doctor scratched the back of his neck and shot an apologetic look in Rose's direction. "Worth a shot."

The Cyberman inserted the infostamp into a port on one arm. The light on the end began to flash erratically, slowed for a moment, and then fell back into a steady rhythm. "Core repaired," it droned. "Downloading. Download complete. Identity confirmed; you are the Doctor."

He flashed a fierce grin at them. "The one and only."

"How nice." The woman's voice fairly dripped with insincerity. "Now kill them."

"Wait, wait, wait." The Doctor held up his hands. "Just—let me die happy. What do you need the children for?"

She laughed. "What are children always for? They are a workforce."

He nodded. "Yes, but for what?"
"Soon the whole empire will see, and they will bow down in worship." She smiled again, a small, savage baring of teeth.

"And that was your plan then, Miss…?"

"Hartigan," the woman supplied. It was the first real bit of information she'd given them. "Yes, it was. Now, we're on a bit of a schedule. It was an honor to be the subject of your last conversation, Doctor."

The Cybermen advanced, arms raised to fire. "Delete," they droned. "Delete." Rose brought the psychokinetic wavelength disrupt up and removed the safety. The Doctor thrust the sonic screwdriver in front of him—and a wave of crackling energy swept over the Cybermen not from Rose or the Doctor, but from behind Ms. Hartigan. Jackson Lake strode out of the shadows with a damaged infostamp smoking in his hand and a belt of them wrapped around his chest. The Cybermen fell to the ground with a great crash.

"At your service, Doctor," he called. "Ms. Tyler, Rosita, are you well?"

Ms. Hartigan stumbled back. There was no fear in her expression, only fury. "Shades!" she yelled. "Shades!"

The Doctor grabbed Rose's hand. "Come on!"

"One last thing." Rosita swung back her hand and landed a solid punch on Ms. Hartigan's pale cheek that knocked her to the ground.

The Doctor looked scandalized. "Can I say that I completely disapprove—now come on!"

Lee parked his car in a driveway in Chiswick and stared. Donna's house, the house she grew up in, looked exactly like their house in the library, right down to the color of the curtains he could see through the window. Donna pulled the car door open and stepped out onto the asphalt.

"Well, are you coming?" she asked. He gave her her best smile (it was a bit shaky, but they were here, meeting her family) and followed her. It was a tidy place, at least on the outside. Well-tended flowerbeds lined the driveway and the grass was neatly mowed. When the reached the door he raised a hand to knock but Donna produced a key from her pocket and slid it home. "It's my house, you plum," she said fondly. "Don't need to knock. I called ahead to let them know that we're coming, anyway." The door swung open with a faint creaking sound and then he was standing in a hallway. Donna was halfway down it already, poking her head into the doors that lined either side. "Hello!" she called. "Mum, Gramps? I'm home!"

"There's my girl!" And elderly gentleman stepped out of one of the doors and hugged Donna tightly. "Welcome back, sweetheart."

Donna grinned and hugged him back just as hard. "Thanks, Gramps." She released him and turned to face Lee. "There's someone I'd like you to meet."

"Is this your mystery friend?" her grandfather asked with a chuckle. "You were so secretive on the phone."

"Sort of." Donna held out her hand and Lee took it. "This is Lee. He's my husband."

Her grandfather blinked. "Blimey, Donna, that was fast!" He held out his hand. "I'm Wilf, nice to meet you."
Lee took it. "L-lee McAvoy," he said. "It's n-nice to meet you t-t-too. Donna's told me all about you."

"Come into the kitchen, you too," Wilf urged. "Sylvia's putting on the kettle; we'll have a proper sit down and a cuppa."

Donna was still holding his hand, and Lee let her lead him onward. The kitchen was airy and spacious—and just as familiar as the house's exterior. Donna paused when she entered and he knew that she had finally noticed. He had eaten dinner at this table every day for five years. He'd read the newspaper and watched their children play with playdough on the kitchen floor. A wave of unexpected emotion washed over him and his hold on Donna's hand tightened. After a beat she squeezed back.

"Well here's madame," Donna's mum said. She was standing at the stove with her back to the door, removing a steaming kettle. "We were worried sick, weren't we, dad," Sylvia continued. "and we couldn't even phone you."

"Well it's not my fault the murderous aliens pulled the Earth out of sync with the rest of the universe, is it?" Donna shot back, exasperated. "Makes it a bit difficult to get a mobile connection when you can't even find the Earth." Her mother was brash, abrasive, fierce, and stubborn—just like she was. They'd never got on well, not as long as Donna could remember, but at least her father had been there to smooth things over. Now there was only granddad and her mum brushed him right off. Lee squeezed her hand again and she gave him a grateful smile. "Mum," Donna tried again, "This is my husband Lee."

Sylvia froze. "Husband?" she demanded. "Is this what you've been hiding all along?"

"No!" Donna denied and rubbed her temple with her free hand. She could feel a migraine brewing. "Look, let's sit down and have tea and we'll tell you all about it, yeah?"

The story wasn't incredibly long, but it was complex and Donna found herself stopping frequently, occasionally to get confirmation or correction from Lee but most often to answer her family's questions. Sylvia had known that her daughter was different in the same way that Donna had known about the rest of the world before she'd met the Doctor: as a sort of vague awareness. She could play off the ATMOS incident as a case of guilty-by-association; it wasn't Donna who was at the heart of the matter, it was that Doctor and that Rose girl. She could do the same with the planets in the sky, but this couldn't be explained away or dismissed. Her daughter lived with an alien \ and his (human?) lover in a space ship that also traveled in time. She'd been to other planets all across the universe, been all the way to the moment the Earth spun itself out of rubble and space-dust, and she was married.

Wilf stood, walked over to where Lee sat next to Donna, and hugged him. "D'you like telescopes?" he asked.

Lee blinked. "Y-yes sir."

"I've got a real beauty out on the hill." Wilf cast a knowing look in Sylvia's direction.

Lee caught the hint. "I'd love to see it."

Donna pressed a kiss to his cheek as he left and the tips of his ears turned a lovely shade of pink. She laughed, but it died quickly as he disappeared out the door with Wilf. Sylvia took a long sip of her tea.
"Nothing to say?" Donna asked wryly. "That's a first."

"When are you coming home?" The fire was gone from her mother's voice. She sounded tired and worn down.

Donna blinked. It wasn't the question she was expecting. "I dunno."

Sylvia stared into the bottom of her mug as if the answers to her questions were contained within. "You've changed so much, seen so much. I don't even know you anymore, my own daughter. How much more are you going to change, Donna?"

"I'm better now," she protested. "I didn't know about anything outside of Chiswik before—it was like the rest of the world didn't exist. He made me better, mum; that's what the Doctor does. Martha traveled with him and she works with UNIT now, defending the Earth. Rose worked in a shop and now she saves the universe. Mum, I was a temp and now I see things no other human being has, now I get a chance to be someone important."

"You were always important," Sylvia snapped back. "You're my daughter. But you hid all of this, Donna. Why couldn't you just tell me?"

"You wouldn't have believed me, Mum." Donna looked away. "I wanted to, I did—but granddad already knew about aliens, he already believed in them. He'd even met the Doctor. You hadn't, and I knew you'd think I'd gone mad."

They were quiet for a long moment. "So," Sylvia finally said. "Lee. He seems like a decent man."

Left unspoken was the memory that Lance had too, at first.

Donna heard it anyway. "Yeah. He really is."

"How does he fit into this life you've got?"

Donna took a deep breath. "We're taking it slow. I don't want to stop traveling yet; there's so much to see out there, so many places to go. And I'm not quite the person he fell in love with in the library—she made me forget all about the Doctor, about everything I've seen and he forgot about his family and almost his whole life outside of the computer. And then he ended up in Cardiff and I went back to traveling—there's a lot we need to catch up on. But you should have seen it, Mum. We had a whole life in there." Awe crept into her voice. "We had a house, this house actually, and we had kids. Me, a mum." She sniffed discreetly and hoped her mother didn't notice. "A boy and a girl. We named them Miriam and Geoff, after dad and gran. And it felt real, Mum. I've got all these memories—I had PTA meetings! I was dieting! Miriam would make up these little nonsense songs about absolutely everything and Geoff wouldn't eat anything green because cows eat green things and if he eats them too there won't be enough for the cows, and, and Lee was fantastic with the children. He was so patient, even when I wasn't, and I thought I made it up, all of it." Donna shrugged. "But I didn't. I can't promise that I'm going to stop traveling tomorrow—but I miss that life. I do. And someday I want it back."
Fifteen Latimer Street was an unremarkable house, fit for a young couple and, like its neighbors, covered in a thin blanket of snow. It was also the house that Jackson Lake and his wife were due to occupy and the place where the attack that altered his memories had taken place. The basement was dark and smelled of damp earth and scorched metal from the Cyberman that Jackson felled with an infostamp. If they needed any assurance beyond the deed he found in his clothing proclaiming this to be their entrance into the Cybermen's lair, they had it. A strange, squat device sat in the middle of the floor covered in plating similar to Dalek armor. The Doctor examined it thoroughly.

"Dimensional vault," he said to Rose. "Stolen from the Daleks, like the infostamps—must be how the Cybermen traveled in time."

Jackson, though, was not looking at the vault. He stood off to the side, gazing at the room. In his mind the Cybermen returned as they had that first day. They loomed large, backed his wife into a corner and then a flash of blue light took her from him. There was something else, though, something just out of reach as he stared at the place where his wife died. He desperately tried to reach it, to find it, but it was as if his eyes refused to see.

"This isn't the only thing they were guarding," the Doctor said and jumped to his feet, startling Jackson out of his reverie. "The dimension vault is here, so this is where they came out but they're Cybermen. There'd be panic if they were on the streets. Ergo—there's another entrance in this very house." He grabbed Rose's hand and moved further into the cellar.

"Let me guess," Rose sighed. "Sewers."

"Got it in one." The Doctor grinned as a passage revealed itself, barred by a heavy but unlocked door.

She rolled her eyes. "You take me to all the best places."

The smile fell from his face. "Sorry. This was supposed to be a bit of a date."

Rose bumped her shoulder against his. "I'm just winding you up, Doctor. I love this life, all of it—even crawling through the sewers." She glanced down at her beautiful dress. "Mind you, I'd like it a bit more if I had my trousers instead of this get up, but I distinctly remember you saying 'no running this trip.'"

"Tell you what," he replied as they rounded a corner. "After this I'll take you to meet Shakespeare. Amazing bloke—he fancied me, a bit."

She grinned at him. "You think everyone fancies you."
Beneath the river Thames Mercy Hartigan stood on a narrow bridge with her Cyberman escort in front of a grand metal chair set into a rectangular alcove. It was of a strange design, similar to her companions, and although the science of it eluded her she knew well what it represented: power. This was the chair of a ruler, of a king. The air was thick with the scent of hot, oiled metal and filled with the sound of clicking gears and hissing steam. It was warm, far warmer than she was used to in London during the month of December and beads of sweat rolled down the back of her neck but she would not show weakness, not in front of her allies. She was Mercy Hartigan and no one, man or woman, had ever been able to change her mind once she settled on something. These Cybermen were strange and wore metal suits of armor, but like human men they could be molded and manipulated by a clever individual. Unlike human men they offered her the only thing she'd ever truly wanted: freedom.

"This is a splendid throne indeed," she tells her companion. "You will look resplendent seated upon it."

"My function is to serve the Cyberking," he replied in his flat, mechanical voice, "not to become the Cyberking."

She paused, puzzled. "Then, who will sit there?"

He turned to regard her, silently, and she realized that they were all looking at her, watching her with dark, empty eyes. She took a step back. "No. No! You said I was to be heralded at the court of the Cyberking—that was the deal. Our deal."

One fist clanged over the strange design where his heart should have been. "All hail the Cyberking." The others took up the chant, until the room echoed with their words.

"You promised," she argued, even as another Cyberman moved forward to grab her arm. "You said I would never be converted!" Fury burned inside her, scorching and raw.

"That was designated a 'lie.'"

Fear crept in on the edge of her rage, fear and the memory of other men and other lies, of hands in the night and smothered gasps and cries, of closing her eyes tightly and wishing for the morning. She could not fight them then and she could not fight them now. They were too strong for her; their metal fingers closed around her arms with enough force to bruise and when she refused to walk they simply lifted her off her feet and carried her. The chair was cold, even through the thick fabric of her dress, and as soon as she was seated metal bands slid out of the chair's armrests and legs, holding her fast.

"Why are you doing this?" she demanded, fear and adrenaline making her voice shake along with her hands as she balled them into fists.

"This is what you desired," the Cyberman replied. "This is your liberation—from the rage and abuse and revenge that cloud your mind."

With a creak and a groan a square, metal apparatus descended from the ceiling above the throne. Delicate copper pipes and strips formed a headdress similar to the Cybermen's. The symmetrical sides opened and closed around her skull and blue light blazed through it, completing the circuit at her temples and ears. Mercy Hartigan's mouth opened in a wordless shriek.

Rosita and Jackson rounded a corner and nearly ran straight into the Doctor and Rose. Jackson
opened his mouth to ask why they had stopped but the Doctor held up his hand for silence and
gestured to the crumbling arch just in front of them. After what seemed like an eternity of following
the twisting, stinking sewer pipes they had found the Cybermen's lair. The Doctor frowned as he
studied the scene before them. Red light filtered down from the ceiling. Children were everywhere:
shoveling coal into boilers, turning huge wheels, clearing rubble and all under the watchful eye of
Cybermen.

"What is it?" Rosita asked in hushed tones.

"An engine," the Doctor replied softly. "Look at the size of that thing—it's massive!"

"They're generating huge amounts of energy," Rose noted, pointing to a screen on the side of the
main boiler. "But what for?"

"Never mind that." Jackson started forward, an infostamp already in hand. "We can free them!"

The Doctor put a restraining hand on his arm. "Without knowing why they're here? Bad idea." He
dropped his hand from the other man's sleeve and grabbed Rose's instead. "Come on. There's an
auxiliary console on that boiler over there. Time to find out what the Cybermen are up to."

It took careful steps to reach the auxiliary console and twice Rose thought they would be caught—
but they managed to slip by, if just. The Doctor studied the screen in front of them intently.
Equations and strange characters which mean something to him, apparently, but nothing to her, filled
the screen. But then she was never very good with machines, the Dimension Cannon being a notable
exception. No, give her people any day.

"Whatever they're doing," the Doctor muttered, "the power's up to ninety percent. Oi—hold on—"
The screen went mad. Number and character shifted; colors pulsed across it in waves. When it finally
settled it looked almost nothing like it had before. He frowned and slipped his glasses on, tapping the
screen softly. "Power fluctuation. But the program—it's changing. It's rewriting itself." He pulled the
glasses off and slipped them back into his suit pocket. "That's not supposed to happen."

"What does that mean?" Jackson demanded.

"Dunno," the Doctor said with a shrug.

"We'd better figure out soon." Rose pointed to the screen. "It's at ninety-six percent and climbing
fast."

On the throne of the Cyberking Mercy Hartigan opened her eyes—but the hard brown of her irises
had vanished, replaced with a flat black film that mirrored the Cybermen around her. They hailed her
and struck their metal fists against their metal chests, but she ignored them. Wider and wider she cast
her mind, through circuits and ages of knowledge: past, present, and future. Faster and faster it came.
It was exhilarating; it was intoxicating. "Oh!" she said with barely contained glee. "Such a wealth of
information. I can see the stars, the worlds beyond spinning and spinning and spinning. I can see the
turn of the Earth, the progression of time itself. This is glorious."

Her escort stepped forward. "This is incorrect," he said. "'Glorious' is an emotional response."

"Exactly," she replied, as if he was somehow missing the obvious. "There is so much joy in this
machine. The Cybermen came to the realization almost as quickly as she did, that she had somehow
subverted their efforts, that her mind and her will were strong enough to bend their design to her own
purposes. Her escort stepped forward to delete her—it was a waste, but there were thousands of
humans below. They would begin again, find a new human capable of being Cyberking."
Mercy Hartigan was not about to relinquish her throne. This was real knowledge, real power. With the Cybermen beneath her she could bend the entire world to her will. As he took that first, fateful step forward a beam of blue light shot from her headdress and hit him square in the torso. He smoked and sparked in his metal suit until the light faded, the joints in his knees locked, and he fell to the floor—dead.

Buried deep inside the programming of the remaining Cybermen, a fragment of what in humans was the survival instinct unfurled. "All hail the Cyberking," they said in unison.

Mercy Hartigan smiled.

"Power levels at are one hundred percent," the Cyberman next to the main control console reported. He turned to the others stationed around the room. "Delete the workforce." They turned to do so, hands clenching and unclenching—when a shaft of blue light streamed out of the shadows and struck the Cyberman in the center square in the chest. The children were forgotten as the Cybermen mobilized against the new threat. Rosita and Jackson, armed with infostamps, took up positions behind parallel boilers while the Doctor and Rose dived in. Children screamed as the Cybermen traded shots with Jackson and Rosita. Rose covered the Doctor as best she could; her psychokinetic wavelength disruptor could jolt the brain out of sync with the Cybermen's programming, causing a neural implosion. It wasn't a pretty way to die but it was effective.

"Run!" the Doctor yelled as he ushered children away from the groaning and clanking machines and toward the exit.

"Over here!" Jackson urged. "Quick as you can!"

The last Cyberman fell and triumph surged through Rose. She slid the PKWD back into the holster hidden in her skirts—she'd thank the TARDIS for that later—and joined the Doctor in hurrying the children out. There were boys and girls mostly between the ages of four and ten, but she spotted a few older children carrying the youngest on hips and shoulders.

The Doctor pulled Rosita aside. "Go with them, take them out of the sewer and as far as you can away from here."

She nodded. "Come on, with me!" Rosita grabbed the hands of two little boys who looked like they could barely walk and tugged them along through the doors and out into the sluice. Most of the children were gone, thankfully, but Rose came across a little boy cowering behind a boiler. She pulled him upright gently and ushered him out along with the others. The Doctor held out his arms for first one girl, and then a second, who found themselves trapped on one of the higher platforms, boxed in by a fallen Cyberman. He grunted softly when he caught them, but they appeared unharmed when he set them on their feet.

Jackson Lake stepped forward to help, but stopped, transfixed. He was no longer in the damp, oppressively hot room; he was transported back to the cellar of fifteen Latimer Street. His wife, felled by Cybermen, slid down the wall to lie limply on the floor once more. They loomed over him, those strange metal men that took everything from him and nearly got his life as well. And off in the distance, beyond the body of his wife, the thing he could not see came into focus. It was a boy, a little boy. He looked to be about five years old, with light brown hair and a gap between his two front teeth just like his mother and brown eyes wide in fear. Father, he called as the Cybermen carried him away. Father! Help!

A hand on his arm pulled him back to the present and he turned to find Rose watching him closely. "Are you all right, Jackson?" she asked.
"My son," he said hoarsely. "That's what else they took—my son." He turned his eyes back to the sight that had triggered his memory, buried beneath layers of denial and false information. High above them a little boy stood on the edge of a platform. His face was smudged with soot and his fine clothes were ripped, but he had brown hair and brown eyes and a gap between his teeth. "Frederick!" Jackson shouted. Tears burned in his eyes and the room swam around him. "Come down to me, Fred!"

The Doctor jogged over, hair askew and glasses still perched on his nose. "What's going on?"

Rose pointed to Fred who seemed to be frozen in fear. Jackson held out his arms and finally the little boy started to move towards the stair case—but an explosion rocked the machine and the pathway down crumbled.

"Fred!" Jackson moved towards the rubble but Rose pushed him back. The Doctor whipped off his glasses and she shook her head.

"You," she said to Jackson, "stay back. And you—" She turned to face the Doctor. "Figure out what's going on with that computer."

Jackson stared at her. "What are you going to do?"

She grinned. "Improvise."

The Doctor paused for a moment and then nodded. "Be careful," he said and waved a finger at her before returning to the main control console. Rose picked her way over to a thick rope tied to a crate. She glanced up, following it to the ballast tied at the other end, and nodded sharply. Around them the engine shook it was coming apart and the floor heaved and rumbled beneath their feet, like a ship on the open ocean.

"Your knife," she said, and held out her hand to Jackson. He handed it over grudgingly. She gripped the rope firmly in one hand and sawed at it just above the knot with the other. After a moment's work she was flying through the air as the ballast, freed from its restraint, sped towards the ground. The rope brought her just above the platform and she swung her legs out and away and landed deftly on her feet. Fred was huddled back against the wall and he stared at her with wide, frightened eyes.

"Come here, sweetheart." Rose knelt down and opened her arms. "It's alright; I don't bite. I'm gonna get you down, take you to see your dad, yeah?" He nodded once. She turned around so he could climb onto her back. "Hold on tight," she instructed.

"Rose!" the Doctor yelled. "They've finished with the engine! It's going to explode!"

"Coming down!" she replied and grabbed onto another rope that hung just off the left side of the platform. "Never thought gymnastics would come in this handy," she muttered, and then she jumped. The platform shuddered and collapsed as the engine rocked in the grips of another spasm. A rush of steam engulfed them and they were lost from sight.

The Doctor rushed forward but Jackson grabbed his arm and held him back. "Wait!" he said. "It's too unstable!" The Doctor fairly vibrated with the need to move forward, to see if she was alright, but he remained where he was.

His concern, it turned out, was unnecessary. A few seconds later Rose emerged from the steam cloud with Fred securely on her hip. As soon as she deposited him in his father's arms the Doctor was running his hands over her face and her arms, checking her for injuries. "I'm fine," she said and waved him away. And she was, aside from some bruises and minor rope burn on her hands. He gave
her a long, searching look but she rolled her eyes and turned to Jackson, who hadn't said a word.

Fred's arms were wrapped around his father's neck and Jackson closed his eyes slowly as he rested his cheek on top of his son's head. He took a long, shuddering breath and murmured something too softly for Rose and the Doctor to hear but Fred's hold on him relaxed and the little boy smiled.

The floor shook beneath them. "Lovely!" the Doctor exclaimed. "Really, truly, lovely—but I think it's time to run!"

Pandemonium reigned in the streets of London. The narrow alleyways echoed with screams and people were everywhere trying to escape the horror that rose from the Thames. Twice the surge of the crowd around them nearly tore the Doctor and Rose away from each other but they managed to hold on—if just barely. Once they lost sight of Jackson in front of them but he soon resurfaced, Fred held tightly against his body. They paused for breath against the wall of a house, protected marginally from the chaos by the narrow front stoop.

"What is that thing?" Rose asked as the towering machine lumbered across the city. It looked like some sort of steam-powered Cyberman—only a hundred feet tall.

"Cyberking," the Doctor replied shortly. "It's a ship, dreadnaught class—forerunner of an invasion."

Her lips quirked into a crooked smile. "History books never mentioned this."

"Humans," he replied with a snort. "All too willing to believe in hoaxes when there's nothing there but the minute something extraordinary happens you dismiss it as an illusion." His mouth narrowed into a thin line. "And anyway—Torchwood will be out in full force after this. Right!" He turned to Jackson. "You take Fred and get as far away as possible. Find Rosita, if you can. She'll keep you out of trouble."

"My place is with you, sir," Jackson protested.

"You've got your son." The Doctor nodded at Fred. "You need to keep him safe. I've got Rose." She smiled at him. "She'll keep me safe."

For a moment he looked ready to argue, but Jackson closed his mouth and gave them a firm nod. "Good luck."

"And you," the Doctor said.

"We'll see you soon, yeah? After it's sorted," Rose assured him, and then he was gone. They watched him disappear into the throng of panicked people for a moment; then the Doctor broke into a run and Rose followed close behind. Time to end this.

Nineteenth century dresses, while beautiful, were not made for running and Rose's dress was no exception. It was far more difficult than she was used to and the uneven cobblestones beneath her feet didn't help. The Doctor moved awkwardly also, burdened down by a shaft he retrieved from the Dimensional Vault. It was the key, apparently, the bit that gave whoever used it access to the Time Vortex. There would be no emergency temporal shifts, not for this lot.

When the solid stone walls of the stable came into view relief surged through her and she slowed, releasing the Doctor's hand to hold her arms above her head and allow her lungs to expand fully. She sent a silent thank-you to the TARDIS for showing her a dress that wasn't quite period accurate; Rose never would have been able to run in a corset. The TARDIS really was the best ship in the
universe.

The Doctor, of course, was unfazed. He opened his mouth and Rose glared at him. "One word about your superior physiology and I'll ask the TARDIS to hide all the jam. She'll do it—she likes me better."

He held up his free hand in mock-surrender. "Perish the thought," he said with a smile that told a different story. "I was just thinking—London is beautiful at night, even in this century, and especially when seen from above." Behind him the full, blue globe of Jackson's TARDIS balloon bobbed gently over the stable's roof. "Care to accompany me for a bit of night flying?"

She looped her arm through his free one and shook her head. "You're mad," Rose told him. "Completely mad."

The Doctor pressed a quick kiss to her cheek. "Love me anyway," he suggested.

Okay, so maybe using a hot air balloon to confront the giant robot terrorizing nineteenth-century London wasn't his best plan (and really, he never thought he'd say that, ever). And maybe Rose had a point; he was definitely mad, bringing them right into its line of fire. He could have activated the Dimensional Vault from the safety of the ground: no fuss, no mess, and no Cyberking—but he hadn't offered them a chance yet. One chance—that's all they'd get from him. He checked the Dimensional Vault and sighed. Finally! It must have been damaged in the Void, should have been at full power ages ago.

"We've been spotted!" he yelled as a proximity alarm blared to life. Rose nodded and moved into position. The Doctor eyed her gun, held securely in her right hand, with distaste.

She noticed, of course. Rose Tyler knew him all too well. "Don't even start!" she hollered, her brows drawn down and her jaw set.

He didn't have time, anyway. The Cyberking turned ponderously towards them until Mercy Hartigan, sitting on her iron throne, faced them.

"Excellent!" she purred, but her voice was strange and her eyes, her eyes were black, purely and totally. "The Doctor and his little pet. Who are you, sir, another man come to assault me in the night?"

"Oi!" Rose was not amused.

"We're here to offer you a choice!" the Doctor cut in. "You have an incredible mind, strong enough to override cyberconversion. Such a mind deserves to live."

Hartigan's face contorted into a haughty sneer. "I don't need you to sanction me," she scoffed.

"No," he agreed. "But I can find you a new planet, with no one to convert. Think about it, a new world where you can exist without enslaving others."

"I do not need a new world, sir." She gestured to the city at their feet. "I have the world below. So many minds in this world, minds ready to become extensions of me."

Determination settled over him like a physical weight. Rose could feel it as she brought her gun to aim squarely at Mercy Hartigan's skull.

"Then we will stop you."
She laughed. "What do you make of me, sir, some sort of fool?"

"The question is," he replied as he leaned forward over the edge of the basket, "what do you make of me?"

For a moment Rose thought she saw something in the other woman's face, some flicker of fear or doubt, but then it vanished into furious arrogance. Hartigan called for the Doctor to be deleted and he stepped to the side, giving Rose a clean shot.

"You make me into this," he said as she fired.

There had been no conversion on Mercy Hartigan, no hardware inserted into her body that kept her brain in sync with its functions, she had simply been connected to a network of information. When the blast from Rose's psychokinetic wavelength disruptor made contact with her networking equipment there was no neural implosion, no psychic storm. Blue sparks shot from the equipment and Hartigan seemed not to notice—but the black film drained from her eyes and the grinding, mechanical overlay was gone from her voice when she spoke.

"Your weapons have failed you, sir. As you can see, I am quite unharmed."

Rose lowered her weapon. "We weren't trying to kill you."

The Doctor crossed his arms. "Rose broke the connection—for the first time in a very long, long time your mind is open."

"Now you can see what you've done," Rose added. "What you've become."

Hartigan frowned. For a moment her eyes focused on some spot far in the distance—and then they snapped back to the metal men looming over her. Her eyes widened, her breaths came fast, and then her mouth opened in a soundless scream. Blue light crackled over the Cybermen branching out from the useless hardware that rested on her forehead. It climbed outwards from the alcove, running over every inch of the Cyberking. She convulsed until a red-specked foam poured from between her lips, and then was still.

For a moment the Cyberking was completely still, and then its legs buckled at the knee. It had no controller, no aim. The engines were untended and shutting down and when it fell it would crush thousands and kill thousands more from the resulting explosion.

"Doctor!" Rose cried.

He hefted the Dimensional Vault onto his shoulder, nestling the end like the butt of a rifle, and fired at the toppling behemoth. Rings of crackling light like ripples on a pond spilled out and surrounded the Cyberking. For a moment it continued to fall—and then it blurred, and began to fade. Seconds later it was gone, with only crushed buildings as a sign it had ever existed. The Doctor twisted the shaft sharply until it clicked and let it slide through his fingers until it rested against the floor of the basket.

Rose took his hand and stroked her thumb over his. The Doctor let her and tightened his fingers around her own, but he would not look at her. Instead, he stared out, where Hartigan had been. The thin, thread sound of cheering and applause from the city beneath came to them on the wind and his mouth set into a thin, hard line.

"She took control of a Cyberking and a whole platoon of Cybermen," he said finally. "I couldn't have done that, not with all my genius. The sheer will that took—what was it like, growing up with a mind like that in a time when women were hardly thought to be human?"
"I've been a 'thing,' before," she reminded him. "So have other people. They didn't try to take over the world. They didn't use children and then leave them to be killed. What happened to her was horrible, but it doesn't excuse what she did."

"No," he agreed. "No, it doesn't. I just—one, I'd like someone to take the chance I offer and live to follow through with it. Just once, I'd like to be able to walk away."

"London will recover," Jackson said as he walked back to his new home. Rose and the Doctor followed behind, hands clasped. "As it always does."

"As it always will," Rose agreed. The Doctor said nothing. Mercy Hartigan's death weighed on him, or perhaps it was the knowledge that this began as a lark. It seemed that even the most innocent of trips turned into life or death scenarios. Rose squeezed his hand and he glanced up, gave her a smile that didn't reach his eyes. She cocked an eyebrow at him but didn't press. There would be time for that later, when they were back in the TARDIS.

Rosita saw them first and swung Fred up on her hip, pointing. Jed waved and Rose waved back. Jackson turned to face them. "We're dining tonight at the Traveler's Halt—Rosita, Jed, and I, and Fred, of course. It would be my honor if the two of you would accompany me."

The Doctor was going to say 'no.' She knew this, even as he opened his mouth. "Yes," Rose said before he could speak. He raised an eyebrow at her and she nudged him in the ribs. "Yes, we'd love to."
Jack Harkness leaned back in his outrageously comfortable chair, a side benefit of being employed by an organization with a larger budget than the military, and folded his arms. Martha Jones occupied the chair opposite him and between them was a bottle of very good scotch and two chunky glass tumblers. A third was off to the side; it had belonged to Mickey but he was gone now. He had a new flat and a new life to begin. Jack's glass was mostly empty; Martha's was mostly full. He didn't hold it against her—she hadn't had nearly as much time as he had to acquire an appreciation for the strong liquor.

"So," he said, breaking the easy silence that had descended when the trio became a duo. "That's Mr. Mickey taken care of. He'll be back soon enough, though."

Martha leaned forward and swirled her tumbler, watching the tiny whirlpool she created. "What makes you think he's coming back? I thought he said he wanted to freelance."

"Nah." Jack shook his head. "He worked at Torchwood in that parallel world for years. A job like this, a person like him—it gets into your blood. Trust me. He'll be back. Where are you off too, if you're still set on breaking my heart and going back to UNIT?"

She grinned. "Your charms won't work on me, mister, even if you are bloody gorgeous and a fantastic kisser." Her hand tightened around her glass. "Daleks took out most of UNIT high command. They need help reorganizing. There's too many species who'd love to kick us when we're down. No offense, Jack."

He shrugged. "I'm well aware of Torchwood's limitations."

"There's this science officer," Martha continued after a moment. "Dr. Kate Stewart."

"I've heard of her," he said carefully.

"Thought you might've. She's been behind a push to scale back the military and focus more on the science—alien artifacts and the like. I'm going to try for her division, do a little less soldiering and a bit more discovering."

He raised an eyebrow and took a long drink from his glass. "You think that's likely to happen just after officers and civilians were murdered by clearly hostile aliens?"

"I think Dr. Stewart will be in a position to make it happen."

Jack finished his drink and put the bottle back in the bottom left drawer of his desk. "Well. Keep Torchwood in mind while you're off saving the world, would you? And if you ever get tired of the red tape—give me a call."

"Don't worry." Martha pulled out her phone and waved it at him. "You're on speed dial."
The bedroom that Rose shared with the Doctor on the TARDIS was spacious, almost double the size of her bedroom at her old flat. A bed big enough to fit three people comfortably rested against the back wall opposite a large desk cluttered with various bits and bobs and half-finished projects, and a delicate vanity with a silky pink dressing gown thrown over the chair. The Doctor sat on the bed with his back against the headboard, the deep blue duvet beneath him. He was halfway through his latest acquisition, a book on nuclear drive shafts from Florizel in the 52nd century when Rose walked out of the en suite clad only in a towel with her hair wrapped in another.

"Bit of light reading?" she asked as she pulled the towel from her head and reached for her brush.

"You take ages to get ready," he complained.

Rose rolled her eyes. "Yeah, well, you could have joined me. I did offer."

He closed the book. "And then we would have gotten distracted and missed the play entirely."

Rose turned back to the mirror and concentrated on brushing the tangles from her still-damp hair. "That's not just my fault. I seem to remember you being a fair hand at distraction, Doctor." She jumped when she felt his hand on her bare shoulder.

"Let me." He took the brush from her and pulled her back to the bed. She went willingly and perched on the edge between his legs while he began to brush her hair. The TARDIS hummed around them, content, and Rose closed her eyes blissfully.

"Are you gonna braid it like last time?"

"Do you want me to?"

She hummed in wordless assent.

His hands were gentle in her hair, far more than her own, as he twined sections together in an intricate design. "It's amazing all the little meanings cultures assign to something like hair. Did you know that on Florizel the braids in a woman's hair indicate her profession, her marital and her social status?"

"Florizel—isn't that where you bought your book?"

The Doctor finished work on her left side and moved to her right. "Got it in one."

"What would these braids say?" It was an idle question, and one she didn't think he'd answer. While he didn't push her away nearly as much as he used to, the Doctor would never be an open book sort of man.

His fingers ghosted over her temples. "These ones say you're, well, the Florian word is B'ratha but it means a leader, sort of. And these—" He moved to the crown of her head and brushed delicate fingers over the tightly twined strands. "They say that you've found your mate." From there her hair tumbled freely down her neck to just above her shoulders. He carded his hair through it, examining the way the soft light of the TARDIS turned it a brilliant gold. "This says you have power, that you belong to no one but yourself."

Rose exhaled softly and leaned back against him. He wrapped his arms around her waist and rested his cheek against the crown of her head. "Thank you," the Doctor said after a moment. "For earlier. I just—I wish—did I ever tell you I met Dalek Sec again?"
"From the Cult of Skaro?" She tried to turn to face him but the Doctor tightened his hold and she acquiesced, remaining where she was. What did he think he would see, if he looked in her eyes, judgment? Of all people, she knew the weight of destruction.

"Yeah. He and his mates made an emergency temporal shift to escape the Void, ended up in nineteen-thirties New York. They were changing. Rose—Daleks! All the times I've offered someone a second chance and a Dalek was the only one to take it."

Rose rested her arm over his and laced their fingers together. "What happened to him?"

The Doctor drew in a deep breath. "He was killed by his own people. The first Dalek in history to change its mind and I couldn't save him."

"But you tried," Rose pointed out.

"It wasn't enough."

She squeezed his hand. "Sometimes it's all you can do."

He hummed noncommittally and resumed stroking her hair with his free hand. Before he could pull back—and he would, he always did, as if physical distance could translate into emotional armor—she reached up and ruffled his hair. "What would this say on Florizel, Doctor?"

"Bit of a matriarchy. You'd be thought quite modern for allowing your consort hair." He relaxed against her. "I meant to take you earlier; last body would have fit right in. But, speaking of Florizel—have you ever seen The Winter's Tale?" He was smiling when he released her and stood, smoothing out the wrinkles in his suit.

"How is that related to Florizel?" she asked as he strode toward the door.

"Get dressed and you'll find out!" the Doctor called over his shoulder.

When Lee stepped back into the kitchen, Wilf following close behind, Donna and Sylvia sat at the table with two empty mugs in front of them. His smile was bashful but his eyes were bright and Donna found it impossible not to smile back at him. For a moment he hovered in the doorway until Wilf finally pushed him into the room.

"Well," Sylvia said as she stood. "That's more than enough excitement for one night. I'm off to bed—and you are too, Dad. Don't think I don't see you out on that hill when you're supposed to be asleep. Ten o'clock, the doctor said, and it's well past."

Wilf patted Donna on the shoulder as he followed Sylvia out of the room. "He's a good sort, sweetheart," he confided. "She'll come around."

Donna smiled. "Thanks gramps." When she and Lee were alone, at last, she exhaled loudly. "Well, that went better than I thought it would." He gave her an incredulous look and she laughed. "No, really. The first boy I ever brought home, right—she grilled him so hard he wouldn't even look at me after, he was that scared."

"His loss," Lee said. He tried (unsuccessfully) to mask a yawn and Donna stood.

"Right. There's a guest bedroom upstairs, of that's all right?" For a moment she had a mad impulse to invite him into her room but she quashed it sharply. Slow—they were taking things slow. As vivid as her memories of her time spent with him in that strange virtual world were, they hadn't either of them
been themselves. Instead she led him to the small, serviceable room at the head of the stairs. He waited on the threshold while she bustled about inside, making sure he had a towel and enough blankets and a suitable pillow. Finally he took her hand and tugged, bringing her to rest against his side.

"It's perfect," he told her with a soft smile."

"This isn't some strange dream, is it?" she finally asked. "I'm not going to wake up in the TARDIS tomorrow with one hell of a headache—am I?"

"No." Lee bent down and pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. "You should get some sleep too."

Donna laughed. "I'm used to running on adrenaline. I swear, if Rose didn't drag him off to bed the Doctor would never sleep."

"I'll be here when you wake up," he assured her. He always could read her so well. She could bluster and deflect with the best of them, including the Doctor, but Lee—he saw her.

"Yeah." For a moment she hesitated, unsure. They kissed at Torchwood—but was that a one-off from the intense emotion of rediscovery?

Lee sidestepped her entire dilemma and pulled her into a tight hug. She relaxed against him and closed her eyes. "Good night, Donna," he murmured.

The corner of her mouth rugged up into a shy smile. "Night, Lee."

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Rose Tyler was never much of a Shakespeare fan. In school he'd seemed dull and ancient, far removed from the important, immediate questions of her life. And besides, the only reason she'd need to know about Shakespeare was if she was going for her A levels for uni and that wasn't likely. She was just another chav from the estate, not clever, not talented (apart from her ability to find trouble), and not likely to be anything more than a shop girl for the rest of her life. What did someone like her care about some play a dead man wrote hundreds of years before she was born?

That was before she met the Doctor, before she realized that she was clever and capable and the only person who could hold her back was herself. She never would have imagined herself standing in front of the stage in the Globe theatre with the rest of the groundlings, holding the hand of the most extraordinary man she'd ever met. The play ended, the people applauded, and Rose was surprised to find tears pricking at her eyes.

"Well?" the Doctor asked from just behind her. She could feel his chest expand as he breathed in through her leather jacket and red camisole and she let her head fall back to rest against his shoulder.

"Lovely." She blinked and wiped at her eyes. "Really, not like I thought it would be at all."

He took her hand and together they navigated through the throng of people out into the open air. Well, as open as it could be, with buildings hemming in the narrow streets and the constant press of humanity around them. Vendors hawked their wares beneath cloth awnings wherever there was space (and some places where there wasn't). Twice the Doctor pulled Rose away when buckets of refuse were tipped out of second-story windows. She grimaced at the smell but shrugged. There were worse places to be then seventeenth century London, after all. He clearly had a destination in mind but every time she asked him smiled and shook his head.

"Surprise," he told her. "Oh, but remember that bit when Hermione turned to stone? I'm not saying that J.K. Rowling lifted that bit from Will, but she might have seen a production of *The Winter's Tale*
before she started writing."

"Really?" Rose asked, clearly skeptical.

"Really!" he insisted. "Human literature is full of little references to other works. Your scholars call them 'allusions.' They're like—oh, like Stan Lee's cameos in the Marvel movies: a little nod and wink to people who're paying attention."

"Like you?" She grinned and bumped her arm against his.

He smiled back at her. "I'm always paying attention, Rose. Like right now—I can tell you're still thinking about what we saw."

"It was a good story," she said with a shrug. "Don't much care for the king, though."

He paused at the next intersection and then followed the street to their right. "Leontes?"

"Yeah. He loved Hermione, but not enough to trust her."

"Well," he said. "A life without love may be no life at all, but what about love without trust? It can't happen."

Rose blinked. "Hold on, that's from Ever After."

"Is it?" He sniffed and changed direction again. "I wouldn't know."

"You're such a liar." She swung their clasped hand between them. "I saw you watching it in the media room two nights ago."

"You were supposed to be asleep," the Doctor said disapprovingly.

"You were supposed to be with me," she replied.

For a few minutes they walked in silence and she watched the people around them going about the mechanics of daily life. Despite the leaps and bounds in technology, even despite cultural or species differences, cities stayed essentially the same. Life went on. People were always people, even if they were blue or red or purpose or looked more like giant sentient mollusks or even humanoid cats. She couldn't see the constants at first, she'd been too distracted by the surface. It was comforting in a way that Rose couldn't exactly explain.

They stopped in front of a building that looked much the same as those around it. It was three stories, with windows that faced the street and a wooden sign carved in the shape of a beer mug hanging from a pole over the door. "I believe I promised you Shakespeare," the Doctor said and gestured grandly for Rose to enter.

As she stepped through the door she was hit by the smell of stale beer and smoke A fire burned in the large hearth at one end of the low-ceilinged taproom. A long wooden bar ran across the other end, and behind it stood a dour-faced man who barely glanced at the Doctor and Rose as they entered. Long picnic-style tables with corresponding benches cut took up most of the room. Scattered patrons sat, some eating, some drinking, all indifferent to what happened around them.

"Blimey," the Doctor said under his breath as they moved toward the stairs in the corner by the bar. "This place has gone downhill."

"You've been here before?"
"Martha's first trip," he replied. "Bit of a thank you for saving my life. Be warned, old Will's a bit of a flirt."

"How d'you know he's here?" Rose asked as they skipped the second floor and went straight to the third.

The Doctor pulled a face. "I may have done some research before this trip. Just a bit, mind you. Enough to discover which inn he's staying at, and which room, which, coincidentally—would be this one." He knocked on the plain wooden door sharply.

"Go away!" a voice called from inside. "I told you, Dylan—no interruptions!"

"Oh," the Doctor said, grinning. "Not even old friends?"

The silence stretched like taffy—and then the door opened. The man inside was not what Rose had expected. From the Doctor's description she expected a shaggy, ruggedly handsome sort of man not at all like his paintings, but the man who greeted them was thin, bordering on gaunt, and while his hair was thick it was laced with streaks of gray. His beard was gone, replaced by a thin mustache that didn't particularly suit him. The years, it appeared, had not been kind to William Shakespeare.

"Doctor?" he asked, clearly shocked. "It is you! I did not think we would meet again."

"Hello Will." The Doctor shrugged. "I was in the neighborhood, thought I'd stop by."

"Told a time machine to get us in the neighborhood," Rose pointed out and Shakespeare looked her over appreciatively.

"And who are you, my dear, another woman from Freedonia?" He took her hand and pressed it to his lips.

Rose giggled and the Doctor rolled his eyes. "Rose Tyler, William Shakespeare, Will—this is my Rose."

"Come in, come in," Shakespeare said and stepped back into the room, Rose and the Doctor close behind. Papers littered the desk that took up much of the wall opposite the bed, but the window was large and set into the wall across from the door, allowing for a deeply cushioned window seat. "How is Ms. Martha Jones?"

"She's brilliant," the Doctor replied and his eyes unfocused slightly.

"Is she with you?"

He shook his head. "No, she stopped traveling. Found her own place." Rose squeezed his hand and he exhaled loudly. "But that's good. What are you up to, writing?"

Will watched him closely but dropped the subject. "I have an idea, yes, a play about a man lost in a storm."

"We saw The Winter's Tale," Rose added. "It was fantastic, especially the ending."

"I did wrestle with the climax," he admitted. "For a time I contemplated leaving it as a tragedy, a warning against pride and paranoia, but life is bleak enough without my adding to it. The years have taught me that hope is a blessing, and so hope won out."

"I quite like hope," the Doctor agreed. "Good emotion. Best emotion, really."
He smiled. "I am honored, my friend, that you enjoyed my humble effort—and that you should bring your beloved to meet me." The Doctor startled but Shakespeare shook his head with a fond smile. "I am a student of humanity, Doctor, and a poor one indeed if I cannot pick out the look of two people in love. It is writ upon your face. Your eyes return to her constantly, and even when you do not look at her your body bends towards her as if pulled by a string. And you, Rose—you are always aware of him. He shifts and you turn as well, and your hands remain clasped." He paused. "I am glad that you have found this. Love is a beautiful thing and the two of you are well matched."

It was night when the Doctor and Rose left William Shakespeare. He was a consummate storyteller and, as the Doctor said, a terrible flirt, but there was something sad about him too, an edge of melancholy that all his smiles couldn't chase away.

"Did you have a good time?" the Doctor asked as Rose shut the TARDIS door.

"The best," she replied with a smile.
Deserts and Deserts

Chapter Notes

Nothing you recognize belongs to me; some dialogue taken from Planet of the Dead.

Look at that, guys--three updates in three weeks. :D We're slowly but steadily wrapping this up.

The lights were on in the kitchen when the Doctor opened the door. It was unusual; as the resident alien and being least in need of sleep he was used to being the first (and only) one awake. Occasionally Rose joined him for a late-night cuppa, if she was feeling restless or plagued by dreams, but it was Donna who sat at the table set off to the side of the homey room. A half-full mug of tea sat in front of her and her head rested on her hands. She didn't move when he entered and he approached her cautiously.

"All right, then?" the Doctor asked.

She shrugged but didn't raise her head. "Couldn't sleep. Wanted some tea."

He left her to it and went through the daily mechanics of making breakfast (not that he had much to do, really, tea and toast and a banana was not exactly a feat of culinary engineering). When the tea was steaming in his favorite mug and the toast was buttered and sprinkled with cinnamon sugar and cut neatly into triangles on a plate he sat down across from Donna and started peeling his banana (they were low—time for another trip to Villengard).

"I could take you back to London, if you'd like," he offered after a moment. "You could stay for a bit longer, spend some time with your mum and Wilf, see Lee again."

"Are you trying to get rid of me, spaceman?" This time she did look up and cocked an eyebrow at him. "The two of you only picked me up yesterday. You can't have gotten bored of me already."

"No!" he replied. "No, no, no, no. I just—you look like you could use a break."

"Not all of us can look as good as you do after a night with no sleep." Donna ran a hand through her hair and yawned.

"You could take a bit of a kip." The Doctor closed his eyes, considering. "Rose should be asleep for, oh—thirty seven minutes."

Donna stared at him. "And that's not weird at all."

"Not if you're a Time Lord."

They sat in silence for a few minutes. The Doctor finished his banana and Donna sipped her tea. When she set the empty mug on the table she cleared her throat. "Lee and I have a date next week, next Earth week. D'you think you'll be able to take me for a visit then?"

"Are you impugning my piloting skills?" he asked.
She snorted. "Just a bit, Mr. Pompeii-not-Rome, and Rose told me all about 1869 and twelve-months-not-twelve-hours."

"Considering we're working with all of time and space I think a few slip-ups are completely understandable," he sniffed, and bite of his toast. "I'll land you on any day you like, Donna. I'll even keep the TARDIS parallel to Earth, temporally."

"You can do that?" For the first time in their travels, Donna sounded properly impressed.

"Well." He cleared his throat. "Rose can. She's got a calendar, helps her keep track, make sure we don't cross time lines or end up somewhere too early."

"Of course she does," Donna replied with a laugh. Her eyes dropped and she studied the dregs of her tea intently. "You're lucky to have her, spaceman. She keeps you grounded."

"Yeah," he agreed. "I know. And—I'm glad you found Lee again."

She smiled. "Thanks."

The kitchen door swung open and a disheveled Rose, clad in pyjamas decorated with lime green sheep and yawning profusely stumbled in. The Doctor pushed back his chair and moved to the sink while Donna hid a smile behind a yawn. Three years of traveling on a ship with essentially no set timeline and who knows how many years of traveling on her own and Rose was still definitely not a morning person. She slid into a seat across from Donna and rested her head on her arms, which were folded on the table.

"I'll just pop off to get ready," Donna said and withdrew, shutting the door gently as she left.

The Doctor produced more tea and two slices of toast spread with peanut butter. He set them down in front of Rose and refilled his own mug, carefully adding far too much sugar for anyone who wasn't a Time Lord with a sweet tooth. Rose perked up as the tea's warm, comforting scent broke through her sleepy haze. She lifted her head enough to take a sip and hummed appreciatively. By the time her mug was empty and the toast was eaten she appeared visibly more awake and aware. The Doctor remained as he was, tea untouched and rapidly cooling on the table in front of him. Rose touched his arm and he startled, his eyes returning to hers after a moment's hesitation.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He smiled widely. "Nothing at all, love, just contemplating our next trip. D'you think Donna would like Florizel? There's this brilliant market in Perdita—that's the capital—and I was thinking—"

"Doctor." She wasn't fooled, not for one minute. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"I don't believe you."

He leaned back in his chair and looked away. "You aren't going to let this go, are you."

"Nope." She popped the 'p.' "Easier for everyone involved if you just tell me."

The corners of his mouth turned down and his lips pulled into a thin line as he turned his attention to his stone-cold tea. "Donna's leaving."

"What!" Rose sat up straight and frowned. "Now? Why?"
"Not now, as such," he admitted. "In a week. She has a date with Lee."

Rose rolled her eyes and smacked him lightly on the arm. "Well, what did you say it like that for, then? It's just a visit; I thought you meant she was leaving for good!"

"She will," he said softly. "This is how it begins, just dates, but then it's long weekends and trips to Spain and then she'll be getting married and moving into a house that's the same size inside as out with carpets and doors and two-point-five children."

"Is that even possible?" Rose asked.

"You know what I mean." He refused to be baited. "Everyone leaves in the end."

Rose covered his hand with her own. "Not everyone. Not me."

"That's what Donna said." He shifted his hand so he could lace his fingers with hers but his voice was low and solemn and he wouldn't meet her eyes.

"Donna wanted that kind of life," Rose countered. "The first time you met her she was getting married, remember? And then she got trapped in that virtual world where she had exactly the life she always dreamed of. She deserves a life that makes her happy, a life that she chooses."

"What about you?" He studied their joined hands. "Don't you deserve those things too? I—I can't give you children, Rose. What if you wake up one day and realize you've wasted decades of your life?"

"Never gonna happen." The certainty in her voice startled him into finally looking at her. A fierce determination burned in her eyes, a blazing focus usually reserved for people who tried to destroy a planet or separate them. "I found my way across the Void, Doctor. I remade myself. I walked through hell on Earth for a year not because I missed the TARDIS or this life, as wonderful as they both are. I did all of those things because I love you. Because above everything else—I pick you. And I always will. What is it going to take for you to believe me?"

"I do believe you, Rose." He held her hand with both of his and turned to face her more fully. "I just—I want you to be happy."

"You daft man." She smiled at him and the fire subsided, buried in the force of her fond amusement. "I am happy. Maybe Donna needs those things—kids and a house and all of that—but I don't. I've only ever needed you."

"That, you can have." He kissed her then, because he had no idea what he did to deserve her, but if someone would tell him what it was he would happily do it for the rest of his life.

They went to Florizel because the Doctor wasn't lying; the hydrocatalizer could was due for a tune-up and Perdita, the capital city, had an excellent bazaar for those in search of technology at reasonable prices. This meant, of course, that Rose needed him to braid her hair again. He didn't mind. In fact, he enjoyed the closeness of the moment. It was too easy to get lost in the madness and chaos of their life. When he lost her that was what he wanted: to bury himself in sound and sensation until he could breathe again. But she was back, and even though she'd been back for more than a year he found himself filing tiny, quiet moments away, a store against a time when she was gone again. Rose would live a very long time but he might live longer and he didn't want to forget a single moment. He braided Donna's hair as well in a different style; she didn't have quite the bearing of command that Rose could muster and this way they could pass through the city unrestricted.
Donna thought it was hilarious. "Are we going to paint our nails later, then?" she asked. "I've got a purpose that would go lovely with your eyes."

"Don't know if I could pull off purpose," he replied. "And it would clash with my suit."

"Could do pink," she offered with a wicked smile.

He frowned. "Definitely not. Rose wears enough pink for the both of us. Now hold still—this bit's tricky."

She ignored him, of course. Following instructions was not in Donna's nature. "Where did you even learn to braid hair?"

"I'm brilliant," the Doctor said. "Honestly, have you not been paying attention?"

Rose, who was lounging on the jump seat with a trashy magazine from 70th century Mars rolled her eyes and flipped the page. "You sure you're not siblings? Cos the two of you are worse than Shireen and her sister."

"Me?" Donna exclaimed. "Related to that skinny streak of nothing? You have got to be joking."

Stepping out of the TARIDS onto the surface of Florizel was like stepping into a furnace. Rose stripped off the light cardigan she'd grabbed just in case and Donna left the shawl that went with her pale green sundress. The Doctor, as always, appeared unaffected. Dunes of red sand stretched as far as Rose could see as she shielded her eyes with her hand. There were two suns in the sky. The first was small and pale yellow and the second was larger and more orange. Both were high in the sky.

The TARDIS stood just outside the city walls, which were at least forty foot tall and whitewashed until they gleamed.

"Why couldn't we park inside, again?" Donna asked as they waited in the slowly moving line that stretched out from the doors cut into the thick stone.

"Because that would be rude," The Doctor reminded her. "And Florians take rudeness very seriously. Also because there's an antimaterialization field that covers the entire city."

"What would happen if you tried?" Rose asked, curious.

"Remember that time we got caught in that plasma storm out by the horse head nebula?"

She shuddered. "Oh."

"Yeah." He nodded.

"That bad?" Donna was plainly skeptical.

"My bruises had bruises," Rose said and waved her hand in front of her face, desperate for a breeze.

Inside Perdita the streets were broad and shielded from the sun by brightly colored canopies that stretched from building to building. Beneath them the air was noticeably cooler and filled with the cries of vendors hawking food and merchandise from sturdy carts. Men and women alike wore loose, flowing robes that were stained with red dust where they dragged in the dirt. They were taller than the Doctor, even, with an orange cast to their skin, Space travel was obviously not unknown; off-worlders and outsiders, some in Florian garb and some in clothes similar to Rose and Donna's
made up a decent percentage of the crowd.

They stopped at a café beneath a green awning and purchased chilled fruit skewers before separating, the Doctor to find his parts and Rose and Donna to wander through the rest of the market. Rose snapped a picture of Donna haggling with a wizened old man over a flimsy, nearly transparent purple scarf and smiled. Six thin, opalescent bracelets tinkled around her wrists from one of the first stalls.

"Fortunes told," a soft, musical voice said from just behind her. "Discover what the future holds for you." The speaker was a Florian woman with laughter lines at the corners of her lips and eyes and brown hair that hung, unbraided, to her waist.

Rose glanced back at Donna, who, judging by the sour look on the man's face, had gotten her preferred price and gestured at a dress behind him. "Yeah," Rose said and turned back to the woman. "I'll give it a go."

The fortune teller's booth was draped with layers of gauzy red fabric that rustled softly as they sat on draped stools opposite each other. A small table stood between them and the woman took Rose's hand and turned it gently so that it was resting palm-up on the smooth wood. She traced her fingertips over the lines and calluses of Rose's skin and Rose twitched. It tickled.

"So," she said with a crooked grin. "This is where you tell me you see a dark, handsome stranger, yeah?"

"I could," the woman allowed with an answering smile. "But that is for silly girls who want fairy tales. No, you have come here for something else. Children, perhaps? No—you would not believe me if I tried. Why are you here, then? They call you a flower, and you are beautiful, but there is something more about you—something of the wolf."

Rose stiffened. "What?" she asked, her eyes searching the woman's face. "What did you just say?" Goosebumps spread from the hackles on her neck down her arms and the woman's grip on her hand tightened.

"A warning then, for you, wolf-woman. Through fire and death it is returning." She tapped her finger against the center of Rose's palm. *Tap tap tap tap.*

Rose wrenched her hand away and stumbled to her feet. "That's over," she snapped. "He's gone."

"That is the warning." The woman's face was impassive.

"It's *impossible.*"

"And that word means so much to you, does it?" the woman asked as she leaned closer. Rose shivered and her hands curled into fists.

"Rose?" Donna's voice from her shoulder broke the tension abruptly and Rose startled. "Everything all right?" The ginger woman carried a bag over her arm and looked back and forth between Rose and the fortune teller suspiciously.

"Yeah." Rose exhaled roughly. "Everything's fine." She left two silver coins on the table and smiled brightly at Donna. "Let's find the Doctor." As they walked away the sharp retort of the fortune teller's long nails against the surface of the table followed her: *tap tap tap tap. Tap tap tap tap. Tap tap tap tap.*
Later, after they found the Doctor with a cloth-wrapped bundle under his arm and Donna vanished into her room with her phone, Rose sat on the jump seat with her latest find from the library. The Doctor was half-under the console, muttering softly to himself as he swapped out the new bits for the hydrocatalizers. An easy silence drifted between them, the sort that sprang up between two people who were eminently comfortable with each other. Rose turned her attention from the Doctor's sock-clad feet (they were labeled with the days of the week, bless) and to her book.

After three seconds she nearly threw it across the room in frustration. The fortune teller's words ran circles around her brain and she pushed them down but they kept coming back. The Master was dead. The Doctor burned his body. And even if he was alive, the Doctor would know, he would feel it.

"Rose?"

She lifted her head. The Doctor knelt before her, shirtsleeves around his elbows and grease smudged next to his nose. "Yeah?"

He studied her over the rims of his glasses. "Everything alright?"

She pushed the doubts away. Words, they were just words. "Yeah." She gave him the smile he loved, the one with a bit of her tongue caught between her teeth. "S'like you said—trouble's just the bits inbetween."

Eight days, six trips, three prison cells, and two near-executions later and Rose was ready for a breather. Donna's date with Lee would do nicely. They dropped her off in Cardiff next to the Hub and she waved goodbye as Lee materialized from the shadows.

"D'you think we should visit Jack?" Rose asked. "Or maybe Mickey or Martha? I bet they'd love to see you."

"Maybe later." He wandered around the console, running his hand over the switches and levers and bicycle pump. "I was thinking that today we could visit Sarah Jane."

She cocked her head to the side and stared at him. "Really?"

He ran a hand through his artfully disheveled hair. "The two of you get on disturbingly well, albeit at my expense." He shot her a stern look and she smiled back at him, completely unrepentant. "And I can change. I don't go back, yeah—but maybe I should."

"Can you say that again?" Rose asked as the corners of her mouth curled up. "And on camera?"

"Rose Tyler!" he exclaimed. "The cheek on you! Just for that—why don't you start the dematerialization sequence? And no help from the peanut gallery," he said with a glance at the TARDIS ceiling.

Rose bit her lip and mimicked him, running her hands over the buttons and levers. She has seen this dance a thousand times, even if she was moderately sure that half of his gyrations weren't actually necessary. The lights overhead flickered and she chuckled. "Pretty sure the TARDIS doesn't like being called the peanut gallery, Doctor."

"She knows what I mean." He leaned against the railing, arms crossed and feet planted. "Can't have her helping you."

Her hand hovered over brass button for a moment, and then Rose began. Halfway through the
monitor started flashing and she frowned. "Don't think it's supposed to do that, is it, Doctor?"

He slipped his specs on and leaned forward, eyes intent. "Nope, definitely not." He studied the monitor and the longer he looked the higher his eyebrows climbed. His fingers danced across the keyboard beneath the monitor and the swirling circular characters of his native tongue flashed across the screen.

"Problem?" she asked as his eyes narrowed.

"Just a bit. She picked up a concentration of Rhodium particles bouncing around London." He tapped the screen and it zoomed in on a small, pulsing mauve signature. He straightened, frowning. "But that's a wormhole—in London!" He turned towards her, glasses perched firmly on his nose, his lips already forming the words and Rose held up her hand.

"Yeah," she said. "We can chase this wormhole and then go to Sarah Jane's."

When Rose agreed to go wormhole hunting she'd thought of something along the lines of a quick jaunt through London, led by one of the Doctor's brilliant devices. Well, there was a device, yeah, but his idea of a quick jaunt was apparently a series of long bus rides spent staring at a cobbled-together wormhole detector that refused to detect. They were on their sixth transfer courtesy of an oyster card he'd dug out from somewhere in his transdimensional pockets. She sat by the aisle as he insisted he need a window seat for 'very scientific reasons, Rose.' She believed none of it, of course, but she let him have the window seat anyway, as she'd refused to let him buy (and promptly eat) seven aero bars with the money he'd dug up with the oyster card.

An argument at the front of the bus caught her attention as the Doctor frowned and covertly sonicked the WDM (wormhole detection machine). There was some sort of problem with a woman dressed in black. She couldn't catch what the driver was saying, but the woman pulled off her earrings and thrust them at him before making her way down the aisle. The door closed and the bus pulled away and Rose's eyes narrowed. The woman was young, with blue eyes and dark brown hair. She had a bag slung over her shoulder that was full of strange bulges and a steady, appraising gaze that darted around as she slid into the seat across from theirs. Rose smiled at her and the woman nodded in acknowledgement before turning her attention back out the window. Yes—definitely something off about her.

A series of soft beeps pulled Rose's attention away and beside her the Doctor tensed. "We've got excitation," he told her with a grin. "Which is exactly what I was hoping for, and also very strange, and I swear, Rose, once this is sorted we'll go straight to Sarah Jane’s."

"S'okay, Doctor," she assured him. "We've got a time machine and all; it would be a shame to never use it."

The bus turned into a tunnel and the WDM's lights blinked in time to the beeps. Sirens drifted faintly from behind them and out of the corner of her eye Rose saw the strange woman stiffen. "What is it doing, again?" she asked, nodding at the device cradled in his hands. One problem at a time, Tyler, she told herself firmly.

"It's detecting Rhondium particles," he reminded her. "They form in microscopic quantities as a byproduct of the wormhole interacting with Earth's atmosphere and attempting to stabilize. The little dish," he nodded to the top of the device, "should go 'round when we approach the edge."

As he spoke it began to rotate, and rotate, and rotate. The beeping grew louder and closer until it was nearly continuous. "Is it supposed to do that?" Rose asked.
The Doctor's eyes were wide. "The concentration just spiked!"

"Meaning?" she demanded.

"The wormhole got bigger."

Two rows behind the Doctor and Rose an older woman grabbed her husband's arm. She looked around wildly, brow furrowed.

"Carmen?" her husband asked softly.

"The voices, Lou!" she replied. "Can't you hear them? They're all around us!" She let go and covered her ears. "They're so loud!"

The WDM shrieked once and then the lights flickered and faded, the dish stopped turning, and a thin column of smoke drifted from the center. The Doctor swore and dropped it.

"Overloaded," he bit out and then he stood. "Hold on tight!" he shouted. The other passengers stared at him and he demonstrated, bracing himself against seat in front of him. Rose followed suit, she'd long ago stopped asking, and just in time.

The world went dark around them and the bus rattled and shook. Moments later the light was back and much brighter than before. The impact was bone rattling and Rose's head hit the seat in front of her with enough force to jar her teeth. They slid for a time as metal groaned and people screamed until the momentum slowed and the bus stopped. Rose stood on legs made shaky by adrenaline and the Doctor held out a hand to steady her. She waved him away and took a deep breath. "Go on, then," she said and nodded to the outside. He flashed a grin at her and bounded out. The woman in black followed after she uncurled from her position between two seats. Her hair was out of place, but otherwise she seemed fine. Rose turned her attention to the other passengers.

The older couple were Carmen and Lou, a West Indian couple who had relocated to London when they were first married. Carmen was nervous and kept glancing about but she seemed unharmed. Lou had some nasty bruises on his arm where he'd hit the side of the seat in front of them but Rose couldn't feel any broken bones. The most serious injury belonged to Angela, who had been sitting in front of the Doctor and Rose. She had a nasty cut above her eye that Rose set to work cleaning, inspecting it for broken glass as she went. Several of the windows shattered during the trip and tiny splinters of glass littered the floor.

Outside the Doctor shielded his eyes and stared out over the rolling sand dunes that vanished into the horizon. It wasn't Earth, no, the sand was too orange, and three suns were high in a sky overhead that was a bit greener than the atmosphere on Earth. They were somewhere else entirely, somewhere that did not look remotely familiar (or possibly too familiar to name, he wasn't sure). It was far away, though—the TARDIS was just a glimmer in the back of his mind, a vague sensation of worry and irritation and the press of an alien consciousness against his.

The sound of footsteps in the sand behind him pulled the Doctor away from his communion with the TARDIS. "Bit further than Brixton," he said casually and inhaled deeply. There was something—off about the atmosphere. Something that made his brain itch—something he should recognize. The woman didn't notice, but then she was human so he didn't hold it against her. She pulled a pair of sunglasses out of the black bag slung over her shoulder; unusual, as it had been raining in London—for the past week, in fact. He cocked an eyebrow at her and the corner of her lip tilted up in a smug grin.

"Prepared for every occasion," she said and joined him, looking out over the desolate landscape.
It was the work of a moment to sonic the lenses of his glasses dark and she watched with obvious interest. He slid them home and dropped into a crouch, running his fingers through the sand. It was there too, the strangeness, and he dropped a pinch of sand on his tongue. He had excellent taste buds this time around, practically bursting with relevant information but the only thing they told him was wrong, the sand was wrong. Also disgusting and he spit it out, making a face as he did. "Eugh. Definitely not good."

"What's your name, then?" the woman in black asked.

He popped back up, running a hand through his hair as he turned in a circle, taking in the dilapidated bus and its position (wheels buried deep in the sand). "I'm the Doctor."

She crossed her arms. "I said name, not rank."

He tilted his head to the side, studying the air just behind the bus. There was a faint waver indicating the position of the wormhole, which appeared to be fixed, at least on this end. "I told you—the Doctor."

"Let me guess," she replied as she rolled her eyes. "Your surname, also the Doctor?"

He grinned at her. "Now you're catching on. And since we're introducing ourselves, what's yours?"

"Christina," she replied with a bit of a smile.

"And your rank and surname?"

"Lady," she told him, "and de Souza."

"Are you a doctor?" Angela asked as Rose finished cleaning the cut above her eye and pulled a tube of superglue out of her pocket. One positive of living with a Time Lord, the stupidly small pockets on women's clothing were finally useful.

"No," Rose said as she unscrewed the cap and carefully applied the glue to the cut. "I just know a bit of first aid."

Barclay, a young black man in a red t-shirt, was standing at the top of the stairs to the second story, scanning the landscape for any sign of help. Nathan, the last passenger, spoke with the driver in hushed voices. Behind them Lou was trying to get Carmen to leave the bus but she refused.

"They're everywhere, Lou," she said with tears standing in her eyes. "Voices—the voices of the dead."

"Turn your head for me, Angela," Rose instructed, careful to keep her voice calm. The last thing they needed was hysterics. "I need to reach the other side."

The woman did and she flinched, nearly falling out of the seat. "There's three sun!" she exclaimed.

"We're not on Earth," Barclay confirmed. "We can't be!"

"It's like when the planets showed up in the sky," Nathan said from the front of the bus.

"Yeah," Barclay agreed, "but that time it was the Earth moved. Where are we?"

The Doctor chose that moment to enter, of course, followed by the woman in black. The others watched him warily as he strode to where Rose and Angela were seated.
"You had that machine!" Barclay said and pointed at the Doctor. "I saw you! Did you do this?"

"Me?" the Doctor asked, clearly surprised. "Nah, I was just tracking a wormhole—never thought I'd end up going through one! Thing is," he knelt by Rose and studied Angela's cut. "The hole I was tracking was tiny, not dangerous to anything larger than a sparrow—until it suddenly got big and we went right through it. The amount of energy it would take to generate a dimensional portal of that size is, well, astronomical."

"Where are we?" Rose asked.

He straightened. "Working on it."

"Nowhere you recognize?"

He shook his head. "There are thousands of desert planets and millions of planets with deserts on them. Narrowing it down is going to take a while."

"But how did we get here?" the driver wanted to know.

The Doctor led everyone besides Carmen and Lou out of the bus. They blinked as their eyes watered and adjusted to the bright light. "You'll want sunscreen," he informed them, "if you have it. Three suns means three times as much radiation—try not to stay in direct sun too long unless you're looking to burn."

"What about you?" Christina asked.

"I'm fine," he told her and gestured to the space just behind the bus. "Here it is—the edge of the portal." He scooped up a handful of sand and threw it. As the sand impacted the air shimmered and shook in a ragged circle just larger than the bus.

"If it's still here we can still go back," the driver reasoned, and started towards it. "I can get help."

"Don't!" the Doctor yelled but it was too late. As the driver reached the edge of the wormhole fire sprung up around and over him. For a moment he hovered, desperately trying to turn but his momentum was too great. He hung in the air as the flesh dissolved, leaving only charred bones to fall back to London. Angela screamed, Christina took a step back, Nathan looked ill and shaky. Rose's lips pulled into a thin line as the scent of burning flesh hit her and closed her eyes in revulsion.

"What the hell?" Barclay shouted, eyes wide and scared. "He was just bones!"

The Doctor sagged beside her. "We survived because the bus came through," he explained in a flat, toneless voice. "It protected us from the electric field the wormhole generated, a great big metal box."

"Like a Faraday cage." Christina, at least, seemed to have recovered her composure.

"Like a car in a thunderstorm," Nathan agreed. "Safer place to be, all that metal conducts the lightning right through." He was pale still, and plainly shocked, but he was thinking.

"A Faraday cage needs to be closed," Christina pointed out as she gestured to the top of the bus. It was in tatters, clearly damaged by its passage through the wormhole. "This one is wide open."

"How are we going to get back if we can't travel in the bus?" Angela asked. Her voice shook.

"We'll figure something out," Rose said firmly.

The Doctor stared at the bus, eyes narrowed in thought. "There should be enough metal left to shield
us," he mused. "Hopefully, anyway."

"No TARDIS and no dimension cannon," Rose reminded him. "There has to be enough metal, 'cause it looks like our only way back."
"So," Christina said as she stepped up next to the Doctor and assessed the dilapidated-looking bus. "What you're saying is we need to get five tones of bus that's currently buried in sand back through that wormhole and we've got nothing but our bare hands to do so."

The Doctor pulled a face. "Well, I'd say closer to nine tones but essentially, yes."

Christina brushed her spotless black trousers free of imaginary dust and surveyed the scene with brisk determination. "Right, then. The first thing we need to do is appoint a leader."

The Doctor rocked back on his heels and opened his mouth, clearly ready to accept the anticipated offer but Christina continued, heedless. "Good thing you've got men, then." She wiped beads of sweat from her brow and grimaced. "Second item of business—back in the bus."

"We'll bake in there!" Barclay protested.

"And we'll roast out here," Christina pointed out. "Of the two baking, at least, is slower."

Inside the bus Christina outlined the essential details of their situation in detached, logical terms. The Doctor sat next to Rose towards the back of the bus. She held his hand, thumb stroking his absently as she watched him from the corner of her eye. He wasn't listening so much as letting Christina's summary of events wash over him. Rose didn't trust the other woman, not one bit, but the look on his face when she neatly stole control of the situation right out from beneath him was hilarious.

"Now then," the other woman continued. "Names. I'm Christina."

"Nathan," said the young man on her left. He was pale but not sickly with light brown hair and eyes. His t-shirt, which was pink, had a large sweat spot between his shoulders. They were all going to need water soon, except for the Doctor.

The woman beside Nathan was Angela and she smiled at Rose, though the cut over her eye made her look like she'd lost a bar fight. Faint lines crinkled at the corner of her lips and her watery blue eyes as she clutched her coat tightly to her chest.

Just behind her the young black man raised his hand. "I'm Barclay," he told them. His hair was cut short like Mickey's had been just before the Doctor waltzed into their lives.

The others turned expectantly to the couple who had remained on the bus. "I'm Louis," the man said. "But everyone calls me Lou, and this is my wife Carmen." He had a gentle voice and a pleasant smile. Carmen seemed distracted and her remained fixed on the horizon as she nodded to them.

"I'm Rose," she said when it was their turn. "And this is the Doctor."
The sound of his name pulled his attention from whatever mad thing he'd been thinking about and he gave a little wave. "Yes, hello!"

Christina crossed her arms and leaned forward. "You seem to be the brainbox, Doctor—so start boxing."

"I thought you were in charge," he replied with a raised eyebrow.

"A good leader knows how to use her assets to their best advantage," she replied and gestured for him to take the floor.

Rose slid out of the seat to let him through and stood in the aisle to watch. Scientist he might be, and genius and dreamer and teacher, but he was also a natural showman. He winked at her as he pulled out his glasses, lenses clear again.

"Falling through this wormhole was an accident," he began but Carmen interrupted him.

"No," she said firmly. "No it wasn't. That thing was made for a purpose."

The Doctor frowned and turned to face her. "How do you know that?"

Lou wrapped his arm around his wife. "She has a gift," he replied proudly. "Every week we play the lottery—"

"Don't look like millionaires," Christina muttered under her breath. Rose shot her a look as Lou continued.

"And every week, twice a week, we win ten pounds." He smiled gently and squeezed Carmen's hand. "You can't tell me that's not a gift."

Rose turned back toward them. "Carmen." She put her hand behind her back. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Three," the woman answered immediately. Rose raised another one and once again Carmen knew. "Four."

"Latent psychic abilities?" Rose asked the Doctor, who looked impressed.

"I'd say—like augmented by an alien sun."

Rose blinked. "What, like superman?"

He winked at her again and knelt in front of Carmen and Lou. "What can you see?" he asked. "What's out there?"

Her eyes drifted to the window again and she stared off into the distance, eyes unfocused. "Something is coming." Her voice was soft and certain. "It's riding on the wind—and shining."

"What is it?" Rose asked. The others waited, hanging on every word.

"Death," she said simply. "Death is coming."

The bus erupted into chaos. Lou questioned his wife intently and she nodded, eyes brimming with tears and hands shaking.

"We're going to die!" Angela shrieked and sobbed into her coat. Nathan, pale as a sheet, tried to
comfort her.

Barclay jumped up and started pacing, running his hand over his close-cropped hair. "I told you, man!" he yelled and threw his arms out. "I told you!"

"But we can't die here," Nathan objected faintly. "No one will find us."

"You know, this really isn't helping," Christina reminded them pleasantly.

"And you!" Barclay rounded on her. Desperation made his voice shake. "You can just shut up! We're not your soldiers!"

"Now, hang on a minute," the Doctor began as he stepped forward, arms raised in a placating gesture.

Angela buried her face in Nathan's shoulder and sobbed, lifting her head occasionally to wail about their oncoming demise. Christina and Barclay traded pointed insults but the calmer she was the louder he yelled. Nathan stared at nothing, repeating shocked denials of their seemingly inevitable fate and over it all the Doctor yelled for quiet.

Rose put her fingers to her lips like Mickey taught her and whistled.

It was shrill and ear-splittingly loud and unexpected enough to jar the other passengers into silence, even the haughty Christina. They turned to stare at Rose who stood with her feet firmly planted and her shoulders back. She was calm, collected, in control—and she looked it.

"Whatever is coming, it's not here yet," she said. "We are, and we're alive, and we're going to stay that way."

"Angela," the Doctor cut in, before the others could get over their shock enough to break down again. "Angela, look at me." She wouldn't, instead she pressed her face harder into Nathan's shirt. "Angela," he commanded. "Look at me." Finally she raised her head and he smiled at her. "There we go. Before we ended up here, when you got on this bus where were you going?"

"Don't matter now, does it?" she asked bitterly.

"Just, just answer me. Where were you going?"

"Home," she gasped out and wiped her eyes roughly.

"Someone waiting for you, yeah?" Rose continued as she caught his train of thought. "Who's home, Angela?"

"Mike, he's my husband, and Suzanne." Angela sniffed. "She's my daughter, she's eighteen."

"What about you?" Rose asked Barclay.

He shrugged and glanced away. "Dunno, just going round to see Tina."

The Doctor threw a grateful look in Rose's direction. "Who's she? A girlfriend?"

The corner of Barclay's mouth pulled up in the smallest of smiles. "Not yet."

"Good boy! Lou, Carmen—where were you going?" As each person answered their voices grew stronger. The air of fear died down. Slowly, so slowly, they collectively stepped back from the hysteria that had threatened to rip them apart. When the Doctor turned to Christina for a single,
solitary moment Rose saw the aloof mask drop.

"Far away," she answered and the longing in her voice was almost palpable. "Just—so far away." Then the mask was firmly in place again and she gave them a smile that Rose didn't believe, not for a second.

"Hold on to that," Rose told them firmly. "The fastest way to make sure that we never see London ever again is to let fear overtake you. We've been in tighter spots before, me'n the Doctor and we've come out just fine. So if you have to believe anything, believe this: we're going to get you home."

Twenty minutes later Nathan was hard at work digging out the bus's tyres with a shovel Christina produced from her backpack and Barclay knelt in front of the engine, stripping the air filter to rid it of the insidious sand. Angela sat in the driver's seat, waiting for the go-ahead from Barclay. The plan was to lay seats down like duckboards and reverse the bus back through the wormhole. Carmen and Lou worked on freeing seat-backs with a short hatchet, also provided by Christina. Rose stood on a dune a short walk away with the Doctor and watched Christina urge Nathan on and give Barclay a quick word of approval.

"An axe and a shovel," Rose said quietly. "Wonder what else she's got in that bag."

"No telling," the Doctor replied with a quick grin. Christina glanced back at them and he waved at her.

"Earlier, just before we went into the tunnel and your detector-thingie went crazy," Rose continued thoughtfully. "Just after she got on—there were sirens. Do you remember, Doctor?"

He paused. "It's London, Rose. I'm sure there are lots of sirens."

"Yeah—but when she heard them she flinched." She ran a hand through her sweat-damp hair and sighed. "Look, I'm not saying she's a bad person. Out of everyone here she's the least likely to panic and I swear that backpack of hers is dimensionally transcendental. Just—watch yourself around her, okay?"

He pressed a quick kiss to her forehead. "Yes ma'am."

Rose allowed herself the luxury of leaning into him for a moment. "So. Do you think Carmen's right? Do you think the wormhole was made on purpose?"

"That test you did was pretty convincing." He rested his head on top of hers for a moment and then shifted away, dropping to his haunches to examine the sand again. "Tell you one thing, though—every instinct I have is telling me to get off this planet now."

Rose nodded. "Tell me about it. It's like when someone's watching you, that tingle you get on the back of your neck." He picked up a handful of sand and let it run through his fingers, watching as it drifted down and piled beneath him. After a moment of silent contemplation he bounced to his feet again and brushed off his hands, staring out at the horizon.

"Don't like the look of that," he said and gestured to a line of clouds low in the sky.

Rose shielded her eyes and followed his gaze. "If that's a sandstorm we'll get torn to shreds."

"It's a storm," the Doctor allowed though his tone was far from reassuring. "But who says it's sand?"
When they rejoined the others Barclay was almost done with the filter and Nathan had the front right tire completely uncovered. Lou stood next to four seat-backs piled just outside the door and Carmen watched them from inside. Christina supervised the operation with her hands on her hips and a jaunty smile.

"Any closer to figuring out where we are?" she asked.

The Doctor ignored her. "Rose, do you have your mobile?"

"Always." Rose pulled out her trusty superphone and handed it over.

Christina watched them incredulously. "We're on an alien planet—there's no way you could get signal here!"

"I've got a very good plan," Rose replied with a grin.

The Doctor frowned and closed his eyes as he stared at the screen. "Just have to remember the number," he muttered, and dialed—and a pizza place picked up. Two successive attempts led to a Laundromat and then a very confused housewife. Rose plucked the phone away from him, pressed two buttons, and handed it back. The Doctor blinked. "You've got UNIT on speed dial?" he asked.

Rose grinned. "And the Hub too. Never know when you'll need backup, yeah?"

Angela managed to get them through the menus to a real person and from there it was a moment before they were connected to the officer in charge of the situation. Rose left him to it. The science was never her forte. Even with the dimension cannon she knew as much as she needed to in order to make it work. She knew what parts it required, how they went together, and what to do if it was broken but the actual mechanics never really interested her. Instead she turned her gaze back to the clouds on the horizon; they were already much closer. How fast were they moving to cover such ground?

"Closer and closer and closer," Carmen murmured from inside the bus just above Rose's head. "And shining."

The Doctor slid the phone shut and pocketed it. "We'll need a way to keep in touch," he said and looked around at the others who had formed a loose circle around him as he spoke. "Anyone else got a mobile?"

"I do," Barclay said and fished it out of his pocket.

The Doctor grabbed it and pried the back off and the battery out and before Barclay had a chance to protest he upgraded it to a functioning superphone. "Planning on wandering off?" Rose asked lightly.

"I need to get pictures of the storm for Malcom—that's the science officer on site. He might be able to give us a better idea of what's coming," the Doctor replied without looking up. After a moment he replaced the sonic in his pocket with a flourish and snapped the phone back together before he pressed it into Rose's hands. "Be back in a tic," he told her with a smile.

"I'll go with," Christina declared and swung her backpack onto her shoulder. "Safety in numbers and all of that."

"Despite whatever you may think," the Doctor said, "I can function on my own."

"Haven't you ever heard of the buddy system?" Christina replied, one eyebrow raised to match the
"You know," the Doctor said as they slogged up the side of a massive sand dune. "This would be easier if you left that behind."

Christina's grip on her backpack tightened. "It goes where I go." She floundered for a moment but found her footing and continued doggedly on. By the time they reached the top of the dune she was sweating profusely and her calves ached. She was fit—people in her profession had to be—but walking in sand was like walking in snow without snowshoes. The Doctor appeared unaffected, even with his long coat and suit underneath it. He snapped pictures of the clouds on the horizon while Christina set her pack on the ground and caught her breath.

"Do you really think the bus will make it through the wormhole intact?" she asked when she had recovered.

"I live in hope," he replied as he fiddled with the phone.

"Must be nice." She exhaled roughly and turned away before she could catch the sharp glance he threw in her direction.

"So, Christina who is going far, far away and afraid of sirens, who carries a shovel and an axe in a backpack she won't let out of sight—who are you?" He slid the phone into his pocket and rocked back on his heels.

"You can talk." Her gaze was searching as she looked him up and down. "It's an oven out here but you haven't broken a sweat. Back on the bus you had that machine for the wormhole and you stride around like—like—" He cocked an eyebrow and gestured for her to continue. Christina shook her head and smiled crookedly. She opened her mouth to continue but something in the clouds caught her eye. "Is that metal?"

The Doctor blinked. "What?"

"There, in the clouds." She pointed to the storm behind him. "There's something sparkling."

"Shining, Carmen said," he murmured as he followed the line of her arm.

"Like metal," Christina continued. "But why would there be metal in a storm?"

Rose wiped the back of her hand across her brow and stepped back, shielding her eyes from the harsh glare reflecting off the side of the bus. The wheels were clear and the seat-backs in place. Barclay was finished with the air filter and only Carmen and Angela remained inside the bus. The air in the wheels, as per Christina's suggestion, had been let out just a bit to spread the bus's weight and give it better traction in the sand. The others stood behind her, waiting.

"Okay, Angela," she called. "Give it a go!"

"Ding, ding!" the other woman said and flipped the switch to start the bus. It moved, barely. The sides swayed as Angela pressed the pedal down again and again with everyone outside calling out suggestions and instructions until finally—it stopped. With a growl the engine sputtered and died and dread curled in the pit of Rose's stomach.

"What's happened?" Nathan asked.
"Out of petrol," Barclay answered numbly. "Must have been low before we hit that wormhole thing."

Christina held her hands up in a universally recognized sign that she was unarmed as an alien that bore an uncanny resemblance to a fly gestured something that looked like a weapon in her general direction. The Doctor stood slightly in front of her, his arms out in a gesture that was protective more than afraid. The alien (it could only be an alien) chattered at them in a language that seemed comprised of clicks and shrill vocalizations. It had huge, multifaceted eyes, a wicked-looking mandible, and a tan jumpsuit.

The Doctor chattered back. "That's 'wait,'" he told her. "I shout 'wait,' people usually do."

"You speak their language?" she asked as she kept one eye on their captor.

"I speak every language," he replied. The fly alien spoke again and gestured at them with its gun.

"That's 'move,'" Christina said.

He grinned at her. "You're catching on fast."

Rose snapped Barclay's phone shut and chewed on her thumbnail. Three times in the past fifteen minutes she tried to call the Doctor and every time it went to voicemail—straight to voicemail. First the threat appeared, then it was realized when they traveled through the wormhole. They were rapidly approaching the time in all surprise-adventures-gone-wrong when someone (usually the Doctor but sometimes Rose) was captured and held hostage by hostile aliens.

"You never said, before," Angela commented as Rose rejoined the others inside the bus. "What's waiting for you back in London?"

She smiled. "Oh. Home. And our friend, Sarah Jane. We were going to tea before the Doctor found that wormhole. Story of my life, really."

"The two of you aren't from around here, are you," Barclay said.

She eyed him warily. Trapped with strangers on a bus in the middle of a desert planet wasn't all that different from trapped with strangers on a bus on a planet made of diamond, after all. "Not as such, no. Is that alright?"

"Blimey." Nathan leaned back in his seat. "Not every day you meet aliens."

The fly-alien marched the Doctor and Christina to its ship which lay in pieces several dunes away. Sand piled against one side, blown there by the ever-present wind that set them to coughing several times, even the Doctor. Inside the ship was freezing and Christina wished for a long coat like the Doctor's.

He, at least, seemed to be enjoying their predicament. "That's photafine steel on the hull," he told her with barely controlled glee. "It gets cold when it's hot, so boiling desert outside and icy ship inside. Just look that this—she must have been a beauty intact, a proper, streamlined deep-spacer."

"I'll remember that when I'm being tortured slowly," Christina replied tartly as she picked her way through the parts littering the floor. "At least I'll be bleeding on the floor of a really well designed ship."
"Don't be so negative." He followed her, still managing to position himself between Christina and the fly alien. "No one's hurt you yet."

A second fly alien waited for them in what looked to have been the ship's cockpit. It conversed with the first briefly before activating what looked like a large purple button on the front of its tan jumpsuit.

"Brilliant," the Doctor said. "I'm the Doctor and this is Christina. It's a telepathic translator," he told her. "They can understand us now."

The aliens chattered at him again and Christina frowned. "Why can't I understand them?"

"It's a one way telepathic translator," he said shortly before turning his attention back to their hosts. "You will suffer for your crimes," he continued as they chittered and gestured with identical unfamiliar weapons. "Et cetera. You have committed an act of violence against the Tritovores—brilliant, that's them, they're called Tritovores—you came here in the two hundred, to destroy us." He frowned. "Sorry, what? What's the 'two hundred'?"

"The bus," Christina supplied. "It's the number two hundred. They mean the bus."

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "No, look—I think you're making the same mistake as Christina. We didn't come here we were pulled here through a wormhole. The two hundred doesn't look like that normally; it's broken, just like your ship."

The Tritovores conferred for a moment and then lowered their weapons.

Christina shifted subtly closer to the Doctor. "What are they doing?"

"They believe me," he replied with a smile and lowered his hands.

She stared at him. "Just like that?"

"I've got a very honest face." His lips quirked. "And the translator's telling them I'm telling the truth but still—the face."

A quick explanation of their scenario and a kinetic redirect later and the Doctor and Christina sat on the floor of the ship watching images and information scroll over the two large screens in front of the pilot console. The Tritovores were busy behind them checking connections and preparing a probe to investigate the strange storm that loomed ever closer.

"Scorpion nebula," the Doctor said as an image of space flashed across the screen. "Long way from home. Just what you wanted—so far away." The image shifted to a planet with strange symbols underneath that Christina assumed was the Tritovore language. It was so green, like what she imagined Earth must look like from space though with very few oceans, certainly not at all like the desert outside. In fact, for as large as the desert appeared to be there was no corresponding location on the planet before them.

"San Helios," the Doctor continued.

"That's another planet," she said softly, her voice heavy with awe. "We're on another planet."

He glanced at her over the top of his specs. "We have been for quite some time."

She waved him away. "I know, I know. But seeing it like this—it's more real. This could be any desert but that, that is another world."
A grin spread across his face as he returned his attention to the screen. "It's good, isn't it?"

Christina's mouth hung open slightly as the planet morphed into a close-up view of a cityscape. Her eyes were wide as she took in the trees planted in orderly rows, the ship hovering in midair. There were some tall, square buildings that resembled London high-rises but most of the architecture was completely unfamiliar in a way that Earth cities would never be. "It's wonderful," she agreed.

The aliens behind them chattered and the Doctor nodded. "The Tritovores were going to trade with San Helios. Population of a hundred billion, plenty of waste for them to absorb. That's San Helios city on the screen, the capital."

"Waste?" Christina glanced at their hosts and made a face. "You mean?"

The Doctor pursed his lips. "It's a good system, actually. Sort of like recycling. And anyway—they are flies."

She rolled her eyes. "Charming. Just remind me not to kiss one." They were silent for a moment as more images of the city appeared. "Magnificent," she breathed after a particularly beautiful view of the three suns setting behind the skyline. "But you've seen this sort of thing before, haven't you?"

The Doctor's face was carefully neutral as he leaned back against the cockpit wall. "Might have done, yeah."

Surprised delight and a flicker of smug satisfaction flashed across her face. "You're an alien! I knew it!"

"I'm a Time Lord," he replied. "Don't worry, you don't have to kiss me either. In fact—please don't. Rose gets cross when strangers kiss me."

Christina raised one perfectly manicured eyebrow. "Does that happen often?"

The corners of his lips twitched. "More often than you'd think. About as often as she ends up with a pretty-boy tag-along."

"So, an alien in London?" she asked with a crooked smile. "What, did you settle down? Get a job?"

"I happen to like Earth," he replied. "Always getting into trouble, you lot, but actually—no. Just a stop to visit an old friend while Donna—she travels with Rose and I—had a bit of a date."

"What, so you've got a ship then?"

He snorted. "Of course I do. Be a rubbish Time Lord without one."

"It's funny, though." She leaned forward, studying him intently. "You look human."

He shifted away just a hair, just enough to keep the distance between them the same. "You look Time Lord, actually. Anyway!" The Tritovores returned and the Doctor sprang to his feet and strode to the pilot's console. "Probe's away!" he said gleefully and whirled to face Christina, who remained seated. "Now we wait."

"But if that's San Helios city don't we just have to find them?" she pointed out. "They're here, they can help us!"

The second Tritovore chattered at the Doctor and all the exuberance fled from his face. "I don't think it's that simple." Goosebumps spread down Christina's arms and back. She rubbed her arms—just the
cold, that's all it was, not the flat tone of his voice or the way he sagged against the console, like it was the only thing holding him up. "We're in the city now," he continued and closed his eyes.

She stood. "Those pictures must have been taken ages ago, then."

He shook his head. "They were taken last year."

"That's impossible." She stepped forward until she was standing just in front of him. "Tell me that's impossible."

"I said it, didn't I," he mused and the images on the screen changed to the wasteland outside. "There's something in the sand—a hundred billion people. An entire civilization ground down into sand. All the people and plants and wildlife. All those voices in Carmen's head—she's hearing them die. Something destroyed the whole of San Helios."

The wormhole was getting bigger, which should be impossible but his whole life was one impossibility after the other so what was one more added to the stack? And the UNIT commanding officer, captain Magambo, was asking if it posed a threat to Earth. He growled and ran his hands through his hair, desperately trying to think. "How?" he muttered as he paced the cockpit. "How could the wormhole be getting bigger? The amount of energy needed to generate the continuous growth would be astronomical and the TARDIS should have been able to detect a power source that large anywhere on Earth—Oh!" He smacked his forehead. "Oh I'm being thick—of course! Not on Earth, then."

"Doctor?" Christina asked.

"Hmm?" he replied.

She pointed at his coat. "Your pocket's ringing."

"Oh." He pulled the phone out and slid his finger across the screen in a complicated pattern while it blared up-tempo pop music. "Rose? Rose! What is it?"

She took a deep breath. Fifth time was the charm, apparently.

"Doctor, it's the bus," she said as gently as she could. Behind her Angela sobbed.

"It's my fault," the other woman gasped.

Rose shook her head. "No, sweetheart, it's not."

"What about the bus?" he demanded. There was some sort of interference with the line on his end, a crackling static that made her wince.

"It's out of petrol. It must have been low when we came through, the driver would have known, but, well—" She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry."

"You promised you'd get us home!" Nathan cried.

"We will," Rose replied firmly.

"Closer," Carmen said, her eyes once again fixed on the approaching storm clouds. "Closer and closer and closer they come—the ones who devour."

"Keep them calm, Rose," the Doctor ordered. "I'm coming."
She nodded before she remembered that he couldn't see her. "I know. We're alright, Doctor. Don't worry. Just get back soon, yeah?"

The Doctor shut the phone and slid it back in his pocket. Christina rounded on him, tension in every line on her face.

"What happened?" she demanded. "What did Rose say?"

He ignored her in favor of the Tritovores, who were chittering excitedly and pointing at the screens in the front of the cockpit. "The probe's reached the storm."

Except it wasn't a storm—it was a swarm. A swarm of aliens that looked part metal part stingray and glided through the sky on wings that were at least three feet across. They converged on the probe like maggots on meat and the last image it reported was a close-up of razor sharp teeth before static flickered across the screens.

Christina shuddered. "So much for the probe."

"Eaten, I would guess," the Doctor agreed.

"There must be millions of them," she said.

He rocked on the balls of his feet. "Billions." His brow furrowed and the corners of his lips pulled down into a frown. "Eaten. Everything on this planet gets eaten. And with the speed they're going they'll be here within the hour."

"Why?" she asked. "Why do they want us?"

"Not us." He leaned forward and stared at the static as if he could will the probe back into existence. "The wormhole. They'll fly through and strip the Earth clean just like San Helios."
Thirty minutes. The Doctor paced, tugging on his already wild hair, deep in thought while his internal clock counted down the seconds until the storm of alien locusts arrived. Thirty minutes until the wormhole, which was already extended more than a mile into London's airspace, would transport them to Earth. Thirty minutes until the end of the world. Just once he'd like a nice, leisurely apocalypse with none of this race-to-the-finish-line terror. Christina studied the information the probe managed to relay before it was destroyed but she couldn't understand it. The TARDIS wasn't translating for her.

"So," he said finally. "We need to get the bus back through the wormhole because without the metal protecting us we'll die, but we can't get it back through the wormhole because it's out of petrol and still mired in the sand." He growled in frustrated impatience and stared at the monitor charting the aliens' approach. "Rose would know. She always asks the right questions."

"We're looking at this the wrong way around," Christina said suddenly as the screen on the left froze on the image of razor sharp teeth waiting to devour the probe. "We came through the portal—but the Tritovores didn't, they came to trade with San Helios. Therefore, the question becomes why did they crash?"

He grinned at her. "Oh, you are good."

She smirked back at him. "One does one's best."

Lady Christina de Souza stood next to a circular opening approximately twelve feet in diameter. It was a long drop down the well to the engine casing where a crystal rested that, according to the Doctor, could get them out of here.

"Tell me again," she said over the internal comms unit the Doctor had given her. "How exactly does a crystal drive a bus?"

"It just does," he replied shortly. A familiar whirring noise shrieked in her ear and she winced. "Trust me, it will. I'll explain the science later." A pause and more whirring. "Okay, I won't, but it will work. Have any panels on the inside of the shaft opened?"

Christina peered out over the edge. Lights blinked around a stone as big as her fist set into an unfamiliar machine but the walls of the shaft were smooth and seamless. "No," she replied. "Nothing. Twenty-three minutes," she reminded him. The Doctor didn't reply but more whirring made her wince and pull the comms earbud a bit further away.
"What about now?" he asked.

"Still nothing," she said and reached into her backpack. A harness lay on top of a heavy golden chalice etched with ancient runes and Christina removed it and began fastening the buckles so it fit snugly across her waist and shoulders and the padded straps cradled her thighs. The Doctor's approach wasn't working and she hadn't escaped the police just to die on an alien planet. A problem like this one required a more creative solution and she was, as usual, always prepared.

"Any result?"

A pulley from another compartment of the backpack fastened on to the clips at her waist and she pulled her long hair back into a tight ponytail. "Not a dicky bird." There was a convenient metal hook dangling just over the center of the shaft and Christina hung the pulley from it. The thick chain would hold her weight and then some, and it was secured to the ceiling of the vessel by thick metal bands. According to the Tritovores the crystal nucleus had fallen into the engine when the ship crashed.

"Let me get this right," she said as she stood at the edge of the well. "If you get the crystal you can get us home."

"Yes!" he exclaimed.

"Consider it done." She double-checked the clips connecting the wires to her harness. Secure as ever. Then she raised her arms above her head and dived off the edge. Her stomach swooped as she fell. Her heart pounded in her chest and adrenaline shot through her veins but she pushed the instinctive panic away. This is what she loved—the thrill of the drop and the satisfaction of victory that followed. She could see the crystal; it was less than twenty feet away when a familiar whirring drowned out the rush of air past her ears and the harness pulled her to a sharp stop. "So you finally decided to join us," she said, unable to keep the irritation out of her voice. "For future reference, I decide when I stop."

"Look down," the Doctor's voice in her ear suggested. "You're just above a security grid."

If she tilted her head just right Christina could make out the crackling blue energy that raced across the air less than a foot beneath her. "How do I get past it?" she asked with grudging respect and a healthy dose of self-directed disgust. Really, she should have seen it coming. Nothing as important as the engine of a *space ship* would be without defenses.

"Try the big red button."

Sure enough a few inches from her outstretched right hand a bulbous red button was set into the wall of the shaft. When she pressed it the grid disappeared and her left hand tightened around the pulley control.

"Come back up," the Doctor ordered as her fingers found the switch to restart her descent. "I can do that."

Christina grinned. "Don't you wish. I saw you up there, Doctor. You were *smiling* when the probe was eaten. The worse it gets, the more you love it."

He sighed. "Oh, all right, but *slowly*."

"Yes sir." She depressed the button and the pulley lowered her at a quarter speed. With exquisite precision she tucked her legs in and then thrust them out again, shifting her center of gravity until she was descending head first nearly perpendicular to the shaft wall.
"You are quite the mystery, Lady Christina de Souza," the Doctor mused.

"Aren't you one to talk, spaceman," she shot back as the crystal inched closer.

He chuckled. "Donna—she travels with Rose and I—always calls me that: spaceman. Better than 'Martian,' I suppose."

"Was she right?" Christina asked. "Do you whiz about space in a rocket?"

"More like a blue box," he mused. "And not just space—time as well. The places we've been, Christina. We watched the Earth devour the sun, Rose and I. It was the first place I took her. And then Pompeii on volcano day—that was Donna's first trip. I've been to the end of the universe, when all the stars burned out and humanity was clinging to a rock in the darkness. And we've been to the court of King Athelstan in 924 AD." He paused. "Funny—I don't remember seeing you there. So what are you doing with the cup that Hywel, King of the Welsh, gave to the first King of Britain?"

The goblet. He found the goblet. She took a deep breath in through her nose and let it out slowly. "Excuse me, a gentlemen doesn't go through a lady's possessions."

"It's been held in the International Gallery for two hundred years," he continued on as if he hadn't heard. "I hardly think they let you just walk out with it, which makes you, Lady Christina de Souza, a thief."

"I like to think I liberated it," she replied primly.

"Don't tell me you need the cash."

Her lips twisted in a smirk. "Daddy lost everything, invested in the Icelandic banks."

"No," he said and she could hear the amusement in his voice. "No, if you need cash you rob a bank, you don't steal something like this. You can't sell it, who would buy the Cup of Athelstan? It's too singular, too precious. Stealing this—that's a lifestyle."

"I take it you disapprove?" she asked as the crystal inched closer.

"Oh, absolutely," he replied at once. "Except—that little blue box. I stole it from my own people."

"Good boy. You were right—we are quite a team."

"I stole it to escape," he continued and his voice shifted. The playfulness faded and melancholy took over. "But you, Christina who wants to go so far away—this isn't an escape. Those sirens in the tunnel, they were for you."

"Detective Inspector MacMillan," she agreed. "He's been pursuing me for years, always one step behind."

"Cut it a bit close for comfort this time, did you?"

Christina scoffed. "Says the man who has less than twenty minutes to save the world." She paused. "But hang on a tick. You've got a time machine. Even if those sting-ray aliens make it through the portal, when you get back you could hop in your box and go back in time—stop them. You could bring San Helios and all those people back."

"It doesn't work like that." His voice was grim and flat. "I'm part of established events now. If I go back and change them that's a paradox. Saving one man who should have died nearly destroyed the
world, but one hundred billion? A paradox that large would rip apart the universe."

"So, what?" she asked. "You would just stand there and watch it happen?" The Doctor remained silent. "What if it was Rose," she pressed on. "What if you could save her? Are you telling me you could stand there and let her die just to prevent a paradox? What good is a time machine if you can't use it to change the world?"

A grating roar echoed through the air and Christina froze. "What the blazes was that?"

"We never did find out why the ship crashed," the Doctor reminded her. "Christina, get out of there."

The time for casual soul searching had passed but the crystal was within her reach. It was larger than any diamond she had ever seen and exquisitely cut. The facets reflected brilliant shards of light across her skin and the walls of the shaft around it. "Too late," she told him. "I'm almost there."

"Careful," he admonished. "And slowly. Do you have an open vent system?" he asked, presumably to the Tritovores. "Ah. That's what I thought."

"What's going on?" Christina asked as she went to work on the crystal. It was set in a plate that appeared to disengage from the panel that was wedged into the engine casing.

"It's like when birds fly into a jet engine," he explained which really didn't clarify much of anything.

She swiveled for a better grip and then froze. The shaft opened up around the engine, which was held to the walls of the chamber by thick steel girders. Less than thirty feet away one of the sting-ray aliens lay, tangled in a mess of twisted, broken girders. "Doctor, we have company," she said. "One of the creatures."

"It must have flown in one of the vents and caused the crash. Leave it," he ordered. "Christina—get out!"

The adrenaline was back and she fought to keep her breaths steady and shallow and as quiet as humanly possible. "It's not moving," she whispered. "I think it's injured."

"No, it's dormant because the temperature's so low down there but your body heat is raising it."

A weak chuckle escaped her lips. "I tend to have that effect." She returned her attention to the crystal. "I'm almost done."

"Not just the crystal," he instructed. "I need the plate it's on too, the whole thing."

The sting-ray alien's wing twitched. One of the girders shifted with a groan. Its eyes flickered open and its tail lashed. Christina pulled the plate, complete with the intact crystal, free.

"I've got it!"

The clang and screech of metal-on-metal reverberated through the air as the pulley whirred into action and yanked her back up the shaft. The creature roared and struggled free, thrashing its wings and body and slamming the thick metal girders into the wall of the chamber. It surged toward her but she was moving too fast, though she felt the wind of its passage against her face. She glanced up and saw the red button that triggered the security grid approaching rapidly. A smile spread across Christina's face as she smacked it on her way up.

The alien righted itself and gave chase. It was fast and would have caught her without the protection of the security grid, which lit up a brilliant blue when it came into contact with the alien's metal
They stumbled out into the bright sunlight and Christina nearly fell. Her eyes were adjusted to the relative darkness inside the ship but the Doctor's hand wrapped around her own pulled her forward without pause. Her pack rode low against her back, weighed down by the cup of Athelstan and the crystal plate. He tried to make her leave it but she refused. The swarm was nearly upon them. All around the air was full of grating roars and the screech of metal against metal.

"Come on!" the Doctor shouted as he pulled her faster and faster. The Tritovores were gone, devoured by more of the sting ray aliens that had been lying dormant in the hull of the ship, between the photafine steel and the metal sleeve of the walls. The ship would be gone soon as well, devoured to allow the aliens to pass through the wormhole. Christina's lungs burned and her legs ached but she pushed on. There would be time to rest when they were safely back in London and if the Rose could keep up, well, so could she.

The air in the bus was hot and heavy with the acrid scent of sweat. Angela rested her head against the metal pole that extended from the outside corner of the bus seat to the ceiling. The rest of the water in Rose's bottle was gone, divided up between them. She sat just behind the driver's seat, alternating between checking her phone and watching the horizon. Nate sat behind Angela and Barclay across from her. They were holding up well, considering, but they were young and strong. Rose was most worried about Angela, who wilted in the heat. Lou was down to his shirt sleeves; he'd taken off his sweater and used it to block out some of the sunlight streaming through the windows. Carmen was distant but otherwise appeared less affected than the rest of them.

A strange, booming noise disturbed the air. Rose flinched and Angela startled as well. She hadn't told the others what was coming for them—she hoped she wouldn't need to, but the Doctor wasn't back and they were running out of time.

"What sort of a storm is that?" Angela cried as the creatures became visible.

Two figures crested the dune in front of the cloud of sting ray aliens and Rose sagged in relief. The Doctor and Christina were alive.

"Don't know why I bothered giving you my phone, obviously you wouldn't use it to call me and let me know what's going on," Rose remarked sharply as he slid to a stop in front of the bus, Christina hot on his heels.

"Bit busy," he said and grabbed Christina's pack.

"Excuse me!" the other woman snapped breathlessly but he ignored her and pulled out a huge crystal embedded in a spidery-looking plate.

"Don't need that," he muttered and snapped off the gem, tossing it aside.

Christina's face twisted in shocked outrage. "I risked my life for that!"

"No," the Doctor corrected her and snapped off a pronged device from each of the plate's corners. "You risked your life for these—antigravity clamps!" He handed all four of them to Rose. "Snap them on the frame just behind the wheels; they'll attach magnetically."
"Antigravity clamps?" Rose asked with a raised eyebrow.

He shrugged. "Found a spaceship, did a bit of scavenging. I'll tell you all about it later, I promise—after we've gotten back safe and sound. Christina!"

"Yes?"

He held up the rest of the plate. "Do you have a hammer in that bag?"

She grinned at him. "It's funny you should ask."

Rose attached the clamps as the Doctor and Christina arranged the rest of the device over the steering wheel and dashboard of the bus. She pounded on the window when the last one was affixed and dashed back inside. The swarm was seconds away. Inside Christina held Rose's mobile to the Doctor's ear.

"Sorry," he said as Rose pulled the door shut behind her. "Got to go."

"UNIT?" she asked. He nodded. "Let's get the hell out of dodge, then."

The Doctor grinned at her and pressed what Rose assumed was the 'start' button. The device attached to the wheel flickered and hummed—and then sparked. "No," the Doctor said as he smacked the side of it, "no, no, no, no." But it sparked again and the humming stopped. He bit his lip and ran a hand through his hair.

"What's going on?" Christina demanded. "Why didn't it work?"

"They're incompatible." He gestured to the wires running from the device to the dashboard. "It's a bus and a spaceship, and an alien one at that. The technologies are too different." He frowned. "If I could just weld them together—"

Rose leaned in. "What do you need?"

"Something malleable," he replied. "Something non-corrosive, something ductile, something—" His eyes darted past her to Christina, still holding her backpack. "Something gold."

Christina shook her head. "No, absolutely not."

"Fate of the world," he reminded her.

She sighed and reached into her pack, pulling out the cup of Athelstan.

Rose stared at her. "Where the hell did you get that?"

"The International Gallery," Christina replied.

"You're a thief," Rose breathed. "I knew it. Oh, that explains so much."

"Not just a thief," Christina said with a toss of her hair. "I'm the best thief." She fixed the Doctor with a firm glare. "It's over a thousand years old and worth eighteen million pounds." Reluctantly she handed him the chalice. "Please be careful."

"I promise," the Doctor said solemnly—and then he swung the hammer solidly into the side of the chalice.

Christina winced as he roughly reshaped it. "I hate you."
The bus emerged relatively unscathed from its second trip through the wormhole, and once the terror of the situation subsided the passengers of the two hundred seemed to enjoy their impromptu flight over London almost as much as the Doctor appeared to enjoy flying a bus with antigravity clamps and a priceless historical artifact. Three of the sting ray aliens managed to get through the wormhole before a UNIT scientist named Malcom managed to close it, but UNIT handled them relatively efficiently. Rose noted that the Doctor didn't express his traditional distaste for weapons as rocket launchers took out each alien. Perhaps he was learning—but the tightness of his lips and the set of his jaw suggested otherwise.

She laughed out loud as he swung the bus around toward the empty street and the soldiers below. The Doctor glanced back and the tightness eased as he grinned at her. Rose wasn't the only adrenaline junkie aboard the TARDIS, though she was going to have a stern talk with him about communication when they got home.

They landed without incident and two UNIT soldiers stood by as the Doctor opened the door to direct the passengers to debriefing. The Doctor, of course, breezed by them with Rose close behind. Christina tried to follow them but the taller soldier caught her arm and firmly escorted her behind the rest of the passengers. She cast a glance back over her shoulder but the Doctor's back was towards her. Rose caught the other woman's gaze, the way her lips turned down at the corners and her eyes drooped. She looked—hopeless. Caught.

Captain Magambo was waiting for them next to the TARDIS. She was about Rose's height, perhaps a bit shorter, and dressed in a pristine green UNIT uniform with a red beret covering her hair which was pulled back into a neat bun. She carried a standard issue handgun in a holster at her hip and Rose was willing to bet she was extremely good with it. A man stood staring at the TARDIS. He had short, wavy brown hair and pale skin and wore a long white lab coat over his oxford and sweater vest combination. Wire rimmed glasses perched on his nose and fingerless gloves covered his hands.

"Doctor," Captain Magambo said and saluted. He made a face but said nothing.

The other man turned to face them and launched himself at the Doctor in a fierce hug. The Doctor grinned. "You must be Malcolm," he said.

"I am, sir," the man replied. "Oh, I love you!"

Rose hid her grin behind her hand and even the stoic Magambo cracked a smile. The Doctor would hug anyone, and he practically beamed at the other man.

"To your station, Doctor Taylor," Magambo reminded him gently after he had repeated his profession of love several times. Rose was grateful; laughter bubbled up inside her at the slightly stunned look on the Doctor's face and the absolute adoration on Malcolm's. As the other man left Magambo's grin widened. After a moment she composed herself.

"I take it we're safe from those things?" she inquired.

He nodded. "Oh, they'll start again—it's part of their lifecycle, not their fault—but I'll see what I can do, nudge the wormholes onto uninhabited planets." He glanced back at Angela, Nathan, Barclay, Carmen, Lou, and Christina who were standing a few feet away listening to other UNIT officers.

Rose stepped forward. "Closer to home, Captain," she said in her very best Torchwood voice, the one she used when dealing with other agencies once upon a time. "Those two lads," she gestured. "They were very good in a crisis. Nathan's looking for a job, he's clever, takes orders well, and
Barclay's good with engines. You could do a lot worse."

Magambo gave Rose an appraising once-over and nodded. "I'll take that under advisement, ma'am." She glanced back at the soldiers setting up the perimeter. "Now—I've got three dead aliens to clear up and explain to the press—I don't suppose the two of you would fancy helping with the paperwork?"

Rose laughed and the Doctor sniffed. "Not a chance."

Magambo stepped back and saluted once more. "Then until we meet again sir, ma'am."

"I hope so," he replied.

Rose smiled. "Ta." She turned her back to UNIT and the bus and ran a hand over the rough wood of the TARDIS's door. "You beautiful ship, am I ever glad to see you."

"Better than a bus any day," the Doctor agreed and pulled out his key.

"A little blue box, just like you said." Christina stood behind them, hands on her hips, eyes roving over the TARDIS. They turned back to face her and she grinned at them. "Come on, Doctor, show me the stars."

A man in a long brown coat dodged UNIT soldiers, moving towards the TARDIS with determination and no small amount of anger. Rose glanced sideways at the Doctor. For all his talk about the men that followed her (good men, like Jack and less good, like Adam) he seemed to attract just as much attention. It's part of who he is, the enthusiasm and knowledge and command and charisma that draws you in, makes you feel special and important, and she made her peace with it long, long ago. Still, she can't help but feel a surge of gratitude when the Doctor turns back to Christina and says, firmly, "No."

The other woman blinked. "What do you mean, no?" Desperation crept into her voice as the man drew closer. He was shouting something, the words were indistinguishable but she flinched as his voice reached their ears. "I saved your life," she continued. "You saved mine."

"Thank you," he replied. "And you're welcome. But we're full up at the moment."

She stared at him, mouth open in shock. "We're surrounded by police!" she protested. "I'll go to prison!" Christina's eyes darted from the Doctor's impassive face to Rose's. "Please," she said finally. "You were right, earlier. I don't steal for the money—I don't need money. It's the thrill, the adventure, like today! I want every day to be like today. Please, we're a good team, you and I."

"I've got Rose." The Doctor squeezed Rose's hand and bumped his shoulder against hers. "And then there's Donna to think about too. I've got all the company I need right now."

Christina stepped back and took a deep breath. Her mask of amused indifference slid back into place and she tilted her chin up. The Doctor slid his key into the TARDIS and opened the door. Her eyes widened when she saw the vastness of the console room, so incongruous with the outside dimensions, but otherwise Christina remained impassive. Rose paused, one foot on the console room ramp, her hand on the TARDIS doorframe, and then she turned back to Christina.

"Go to Cardiff, if you can," she said. "Ask for Jack Harkness in the tourist center at Millennium Plaza. Tell them that Rose Tyler sent you. All that talent and ambition shouldn't be wasted. You've seen how big the universe is—the sort of threat that comes up against Earth every day. Maybe you'd like to defend it, you know—for variety."
"Rose, are you coming?" She slipped inside as the Doctor came to the door, just in time to see Detective Inspector MacMillan, presumably, lead Christina to a police car in handcuffs.

"Go on," Rose said from the jump seat. "I know you want to help her."

He threw a grateful look back to her and stepped outside, closing the door behind him. One of the UNIT officers stopped MacMillan and the Doctor took that opportunity to slip behind the Detective Inspector and sonic Christina's handcuffs. They opened with a click and she glanced up as he moved back towards the TARDIS. She licked her lips and nodded a quick acknowledgement as MacMillan's second in command helped her into the police car.

The Doctor crossed his arms and leaned back against the TARDIS to watch as Christina left the handcuffs on the seat and snuck out the other side of the police car. He knew where she was going, of course, there was really only one way out for her. If not by TARDIS—then why not by bus?

"Doctor!" Carmen's voice drew him away from his contemplation of Christina and he beamed at her and Lou. "You take care now," she ordered.

"And you," he replied. "Back in time for tea, yeah? Chops and gravy and all that." He started to turn away but she grabbed his arm with more strength that he would have thought she possessed.

"No, but you be careful." Her voice was urgent and she squinted into his eyes, like there was something she could almost see. He froze. The alien suns were gone, and their radiation decaying. In moments her augmented gift would fade back to the faint trace to which she was accustomed but for now she could see what he could not. "I think," she continued hesitantly. "Your song is ending, sir."

"What do you mean?" he asked, his voice low and serious.

"It is returning. It is returning through the dark and then, Doctor? Oh, he will knock four times." Her lips trembled and her eyes shone with unshed tears. She pulled away and Lou wrapped his arms around her.

Rose was waiting for him on the jump seat, watching the monitor with a great deal of amusement. It was on, the Doctor realized, and tuned to just outside. She laughed when the bus rose above the police and UNIT. He sat down beside her to watch it grow smaller and smaller, until finally it disappeared into the night. She leaned into him, resting her head against his chest, and he curled his arm around her shoulders.

"Thank you for earlier," she said after a moment. "For stopping to think about asking her along."

"Can you imagine her and Donna?" he asked and she giggled. "I'd never hear the end of it. And besides, what you did was perfect. Let Jack give her a taste of world-saving, see if she's really suited to it."

Rose hummed softly in agreement, and then leaned over and stuck her hand in his trouser pocket. He leered at her but she rolled her eyes and pulled out her mobile, waving it in front of his face. "Next time we're separated you should, I dunno, use this to tell me where you are and what's going on. I called you five times, five times and you picked up once." She dropped back against the seat and sighed, squeezing the bridge of her nose. "It would have been nice to know what you were planning, with the clamps and all."

He swallowed. "You're right. I'm sorry. But there was this ship that came to trade with San Helios—that's the planet, San Helios—and we were captured by Tritovores and—I meant to call you, I did."
He made a face. "But then UNIT kept calling and Magambo wanted me to tell her the wormhole was a threat so she could destroy it—"

"What?" Rose demanded.

He winced. "Oh. Did I not mention that?"

Rose glared at him. "No. You didn't."

"Right. Well." He rubbed the back of his neck with one hand. "Sorry?"

She sighed and let her head drop back against the jump seat. "You can't keep doing that. You can't put me somewhere safe while you rush off into danger." He opened his mouth to object but she held up her hand. "Yeah, I know what you were doing. Someone had to keep them calm and together… but you could have asked."

"I'm not very good at this," he confessed softly.

"At what?" she asked and raised her head to look at him. "Having an equal partner? Coz like it or not, that's what I am. If you push me I'll push back, and if you send me away there's no power in the universe that could keep me from finding you." She nudged his shoulder with her own. "So get used to it, coz I'm here to stay."
The TARDIS was on nightcycle, Her version of sleep, and Donna was tucked safely in her room and asleep, and so was Rose, curled up next to the Doctor, who was not asleep. This was not unusual. As a Time Lord he needed far less sleep than a human and less even than a TARDIS. He could go for months without needing more than an hour or two every other night, and two weeks without sleeping at all, though afterward he would sleep like the dead for twelve hours straight.

It wasn't biology keeping him awake, though. Over and over again he heard Carmen's words. He covered his ears and closed his eyes but he couldn't keep them out. Even the sound of Rose's heartbeat, the gentle press of her back against him as she inhaled and exhaled couldn't drive them away.

_Your song is ending. It is returning. He will knock four times._

The problem with prophecies—and ooh, nice bit of alliteration there—is that they were all so bloody vague. Once, just once in his life he'd like to see a seer or an oracle just come out and say what they mean without all the mumbo-jumbo. It scared the ignorant or the gullible, but not him. And if he just kept telling himself that last bit maybe he'd believe it.

Because there was a tingle at the base of his skull building, an itch he never could quite scratch that made the hair on his arms and the back of his neck stand straight up. It was a warning: a storm is coming.

"Doctor?"

He blinked. Rose rolled over, eyes half-open, hair a riot as it always was when she woke. With conscious effort he relaxed his hold on her. Waking her was the last thing he wanted. She was too perceptive, Rose—she saw too much.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing," he replied in a voice that didn't convince himself, much less her. "Nothing at all, just fancied a bit of a wander, actually, was about to get up."

She was silent for a moment. "Lights low."

The TARDIS did as Rose asked, of course, She nearly always did and sometimes it would be nice if She was on his side, for once, but the TARDIS seemed to think he was being exceptionally silly and
wasn't afraid to let him know it. The lights came on gently, allowing their eyes time to adjust (well, Rose's eyes—his were much quicker on the uptake). She sat up, pulling the duvet with her and he'd forgotten that part, that she was naked. Of course she was naked; they'd come back and had a celebratory hooray-we-didn't-die shag and after that Rose always slept naked. It was just—distracting—now that he was meant to be hiding something from her. (Because he doesn't know what *your song is ending* means but he can guess)

"What's this about, then?" she asks after a long, searching look.

He rolled his eyes. "Really, Rose, it was nothing, just a brief bout or restlessness brought on by the fact that you humans sleep so much. Honestly, you don't even need eight hours a night! Your biology would be fine with six, but you *like* sleeping." The Doctor sniffed. "Do you know how much more you could do with an extra two hours in the day?"

Rose was unconvinced. Her lips turned down into a frown and her brow furrowed. "I thought we were past this," she said with a sigh as she leaned back against the headboard.

He blinked. "Past what?"

She gave him a tight, lopsided smile. "Past you babbling at me in the hopes that the sheer volume of words coming out of that gob of yours would distract me from whatever it is that's bothering you."

It was involuntary, the way he rubbed the back of his neck and tugged on his ear and that was why he didn't play poker—he was a terrible liar this time around. "You know me too well," he said at last, with a self-depreciating huff.

"Was it Carmen?"

He paused. "What makes you think that?"

Rose pulls her knees up and rests her crossed arms on them. "I saw her on the viewscreen. She said something to you, I couldn't hear what, an' you looked—scared, I guess. I wanted to bring it up earlier, but, well—" she gave him the smile he loved so much, the tip of her tongue caught between her teeth. "We were a bit busy then.

He grinned in response. It was reflexive; when Rose Tyler smiled, so did he. "We were busy. Could be busy again in a moment."

She held up a hand. "Not until you tell me."

"Your song is ending," the Doctor says quickly, because maybe if he gets it out fast enough he won't have to think about what it might mean.

Rose frowned. "The Ood said that. Remember? The one with the Greek letter."

"Ood Sigma," he acknowledged. "I remember."

She worried her bottom lip with her teeth. "What does it mean?"

"It could mean anything," he admitted as he shifted so that he was sitting beside her, his back against the headboard and he long legs stretched out beside hers. "Or it could mean nothing at all, just a coincidence."

"Like 'Bad Wolf' was?" Rose asked with a sidelong look.
"Touché," he admitted and then made a face. "Oh, don't let me say that again. That was just—no. But, Rose—" he laced his fingers through hers. "Time is always changing and Carmen was on the edge of her talents, which had been augmented by the radiation from San Helios's suns. It was fading. Whatever she saw was indistinct at best. They're just words, in the end, and they only have the power that we give them."

She let him kiss her then, apparently satisfied with his answer. He tried to push the foreboding out of his mind, to lose himself in her but the itch in his skull remained.

A storm was coming.

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Five corridors and three doors down Donna Noble wasn't sleeping. By all rights she should have been; the clock on her nightstand proclaimed the time to be just past six in the morning and she and Rose had at least one thing in common: they were not early risers. She rolled onto her side, letting her left arm hang off the bed and curling her right hand beneath her chin. She tried sleeping on her back, on her stomach, with her head beneath the pillow—nothing helped. Sleep would not come, and the reason for that sat next to her clock on her nightstand in a small, velvet covered box.

Six months of doing the dating thing, of getting to know each other all over again and also for the first time. Six months of going to the movies, and out to eat, and for coffee, and once or twice to the pub. Six months of Cardiff and Chiswick and Lee having tea with her mum and gramps and Rose giving her that look every time she walked through the TARDIS doors again. Six wonderful months that seemed like so much longer. Six wonderful months that might be ending soon.

It wasn't like Donna knew he was going to ask her to marry him, properly this time, in a church instead of a giant computer. If he'd pushed her about it at all she would have said no, and maybe he knew her better than she thought, because he didn't. He just pressed the ring, still in the box, into her hands and asked her to think about.

And boy, was she thinking about it. What would it be like, living in a flat on Earth, in one time on one country be like? Stifling, if she was back with her mum (even with gramps as a buffer). But Lee—it might be nice, living with him. Seeing him every day instead of once a week, being able to fall asleep and know that he'll be there when she wakes up.

Still, no need to rush into anything. She tried that once with Lance and look how that turned out.

Eventually Donna drifted off to sleep, only to wake a few hours later when the TARDIS shuddered and tipped around her. Knick-knacks scattered from the top of her dresser and the shelves beside it; thankfully the thick carpet cushioned them and even the more delicate souvenirs didn't break, but she hardly noticed that. She was off like a shot, pausing only briefly to grab her dressing gown before she dashed out into the corridor and towards the console room.

The ship shook violently and nearly tossed her through the doorway and into the wall; only a desperate grab for one of the curving support columns saved her from at least a nasty bruising. Rose and the Doctor danced around the console, pushing buttons and pulling levers and hanging on for dear life. He called out instructions and Rose relayed readings from the viewscreen. For a long moment the shaking intensified and Donna wondered in horror if the TARDIS was going to rip apart at the seams and cast them all out into the Vortex—and then it stopped. Everything stopped, the shaking, the shuddering, the pitch and roll. Inertia carried her into the wall as she finally lost her grip and Donna winced. Oh, that one was going to bruise.

"What's going on?" she demanded. "Are we being attacked?"
"That's impossible!" the Doctor exclaimed, his eyes fixed to the viewscreen as the circular characters of his native language scrolled across.

"No, Donna," Rose replied though she did not look away. "We're trying to get to Sarah Jane."

"Well what's the problem, then?" Donna asked as she picked herself up off the floor. "She lives on Earth; don't you know her address?"

"It's like—she's in a state of flux," the Doctor said and pulled out his specs, sliding them into place. "But that's impossible! She's a human, not a time-thing, not like the TARDIS."

"What do you mean, state of flux?" Rose demanded. She was worried, but then she and Sarah Jane were friends, if Donna remembered right. There had definitely been an easy camaraderie between them the last time they'd been together.

The Doctor's face hardened. "Remember Shan Shen? That beetle that changed the timelines, built that parallel world all around Donna? There's something like that happening now, but it's centered around Sarah Jane."

Rose worried her bottom lip with her teeth. "D'you think it's the Trickster again?"

The Doctor's lips pulled into a thin, tight line as he glanced at her. "Could be. He and Sarah Jane have a history."

"Can you get through whatever it is that's keeping the TARDIS out?" Donna asked.

He nodded. "Should be able to, but it'll be dicey for a bit—rocky."

"Good. Just give me a mo."

He blinked. "Why?"

Donna stared at him. "Because I'm not helping you save your friend in my dressing gown, you bleeding alien! Blimey, sometimes I think you really are from Mars!"

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