Time is Still A-Flying

by Chocolatequeen

Summary

With a bond and a promise of forever, the Doctor and Rose have managed to escape the trap set for them in Torchwood. But Time is not yet done with them. The Master is still in London and Election Day draws ever closer. He’s tried to separate them once; will they survive a second attempt?

Sequel to To Make Much of Time

Notes

So, here is the promised sequel to To Make Much of Time. I really advise reading that first, but if you want to dive in here, this is what you need to know. 1) Bad Wolf altered Rose, giving her telepathy, time senses and an extended lifespan. 2) Rose and the Doctor have a telepathic bond that is equivalent to a human engagement. 3) Rose and the TARDIS share the same kind of pilot/ship bond the Doctor has with her.
For four months after Canary Wharf, finding a way to let Rose say goodbye to her mother was the Doctor’s top priority. They chased down more than one crack in the Void, only to watch it close just as they got there. But finally, they found one just big enough to slip a message through.

“I’ll have to…” The Doctor tugged at his ear as he looked at the calculations. “The amount of power it’ll take to send this transmission is enormous.”

“Doctor.” He looked up, and Rose pointed to the image on the scanner of a star going supernova.

“Brilliant!”

He grinned broadly, and Rose was reminded of another face smiling at her, with the London Eye in the background.

The Doctor nodded. “Yep! You’re always seeing what I’ve missed, Rose Tyler. While I work on harnessing that power and setting up the connection, you need to reach out to your mum. Jackie isn’t telepathic, but there’s a natural, empathic connection between a mother and child that grows stronger if the relationship is nurtured. She’ll be able to hear your voice.”

Rose wasn’t sure of that, but to her surprise, when she reached out for her mum, focusing on what it felt like to be with her, she could tell Jackie noticed. Once the connection was made, the TARDIS was able to amplify it and keep it steady so Jackie could follow it to where the gap came out.

It took him a little longer to do his part, tweaking the thermodynamics of a dying star being a slightly more difficult task. But just before supper, he straightened up from where he was standing, hunched over the console, and smiled at Rose.

“Done.”

“How long will it take, do you think?” Rose asked.

He shrugged. “Depends on how far they have to go to get to the breach. The TARDIS will let us know when she’s in position though.”

When there was still no Jackie the next morning after breakfast, Rose started to doubt this would work. “What if she couldn’t follow the signal?” she asked the Doctor, fidgeting in the jump seat.

He pulled her hand away from her mouth and Rose tore at her cuticles with her nails instead. “Give it a bit longer before you start worrying,” he suggested sympathetically.

She started to argue, but before she could, the TARDIS beeped. Rose looked at the scanner and drew in a deep breath when she saw the message on the screen, saying the communication link was ready.

The Doctor took her hand and squeezed. “Ready?”

“No,” she said honestly, “but I know this is my last chance to say goodbye. Go ahead.”

The last was said to the TARDIS, and a projection flickered in front of them before solidifying. Rose choked out a gasp when she saw her mum again for the first time in months, standing on a windy beach with Mickey and Pete looking on.
Jackie put a hand over her mouth. “Oh, when you disappeared, I thought I’d never see you again! I didn’t know where you’d gone, Rose. Where are you?”

“Inside the TARDIS.” Rose swallowed, and forced a smile. “We found one tiny gap in the universe left, and the Doctor figured out a way to get a message through.”

“You pointed out the supernova, Rose.” The Doctor brushed his thumb over her knuckles. “It’s taking a lot of power to send this transmission, Jackie. We’re burning up a sun just to say goodbye.”

The lines around Jackie’s lips tightened. “You look like ghosts.”

The Doctor pulled his sonic screwdriver out of his pocket. “Hold on,” he said, then directed it at the controls.

Tears clogged Rose’s throat when her mum took a step closer to the projection, her hand raised. “We’re still just an image, Mum.”

“Well, then why don’t you figure out a way to come through properly?” Jackie demanded.

“The whole thing would fracture,” the Doctor said, and Rose’s heart broke at the gentle tone in his voice. “Two universes would collapse.”

Her mum scowled, and the Doctor took an instinctive step back, even though there was no way her slap could reach him across the Void. “You listen to me, Doctor,” she said, pointing her finger at the spot Rose surmised would be his chest. “I’ve heard Rose talk about some of the things you do. So you put that big alien brain of yours to work on finding a way to visit us.”

“Where are you?” Rose said, defusing the brewing argument.

“In bleeding Norway, Rose!” The wind blew a strand of hair into Jackie’s face, and she pushed it back over her ear. “We had to drive all day to get here. Why couldn’t you have sent this message someplace closer to home, that’s what I want to know.”

Rose and the Doctor shared a look. A beach in Norway—it couldn’t be a coincidence. “This is one of the weakest points in the walls between the worlds, Mum. When I got back to our universe, I ended up on our version of the same beach.”

“You’ve got about ninety seconds left,” the Doctor said.

Rose stared at her mum. “I can’t think of what to say,” she said on a gasp.

“I’m pregnant,” Jackie said abruptly. “That’s why I want you to find a way to visit, so your little brother or sister can know their big sister. An’ I know he’ll say there’s no way, but he’s always managed to bring you home to me before, so I’m not gonna give up.”

Rose’s jaw dropped. “A baby?”

Jackie smiled tremulously and swiped at the tears that were running down her face. “Yeah, I’m about three months along.”

The Doctor’s hand tightened reassuringly around Rose’s, pressing the cool band of her ring into her fingers.

“Oh! Remember when I told you we’re engaged and you asked…” She pulled her hand free and wagged her fingers so her mother could see the ring.
Her mum’s wide eyes and smile made Rose laugh. “So you finally got around to buying a ring then?” Jackie asked rhetorically.

The Doctor huffed. “I’ll have you know, I had that in my coat pocket… that day. I just hadn’t found the right moment to give it to Rose yet.”

Rose looked sideways at him; he was leaving out the fact that he’d just bought it earlier that day, but there wasn’t any point in riling her mum up when this really might be the last time they talked.

“So, have you planned the wedding yet?” Jackie asked. There was a manic glint in her eyes, and Rose bit back a groan. “Oh, you’ll want to make sure you get Sue for the catering. Don’t listen to what everyone else says about that fancy place down the hill—Sue is better and only half the price. And flowers! Oh, Rose. You will carry roses, won’t you?”

Time was running out, and the Doctor saw a chance to make sure there was laughter mixed in with the tears. “Actually, Jackie, Rose has agreed to a Time Lord wedding.”

He didn’t have to wait long for a response. Jackie set her jaw and crossed her arms. “If you’re marrying her, you’ll marry her proper—not in some kind of weird alien ritual,” she ordered, then blinked when the Doctor and Rose both laughed.

The console beeped, and he glanced at the timer. “Twenty seconds, love,” he told Rose quietly.

Jackie let out a little half sob when she overheard the endearment. “Oh Rose, I don’t care how you get married or what you do, as long as you’re happy. And himself there seems to make you happy—seems to like making you happy, even.”

“He does, Mum. And Pete, Pete makes you happy, right? And the baby on the way?”

Jackie looked over her shoulder at her waiting husband. “Yeah, he does. They both do,” she amended, resting her hand on her belly.

The Doctor moved back just a half step from Rose, letting her focus on Jackie. Mother and daughter held each other’s gaze for a few seconds, saying all they wouldn’t have time to say out loud—they were happy with their lives and wouldn’t trade what they had, but it was a bittersweet happiness, because they were separated.

“I love you, sweetheart!” Jackie said.

“Mum! Oh Mum, I love you so much.”

The projection flickered again, then disappeared. Rose stared at the blank spot in the console room for a minute, then turned around slowly. Tears glistened in her eyes, and the Doctor wanted to pull her into his arms, but he waited for a cue from her.

“She’s gone,” Rose said in a flat voice.

“Yes.”

“She’s my mum, and I’m never gonna see her again.”

The Doctor reached out and tilted Rose’s chin up so she was looking him in the eye, rather than staring at his chest. “Why don’t you go take a bath?” he suggested quietly. “I can bring you tea, or a glass of wine, and you can sit there until you feel up to talking or eating.”
Rose nodded numbly and let the Doctor turn her toward the corridor. He brushed his lips against her ear and whispered, “Tea or wine?”

“Um… wine please,” Rose said. The Doctor pushed lightly on her back, and she shuffled toward their room.

She was vaguely aware as she went that he was saying something to the TARDIS, but she didn’t understand what he’d asked until she saw steam wafting out of the en suite. The whole room smelled like lavender and vanilla, and a little bit of the tension eased out of her body as she stripped and lowered herself into the hot water.

The water shut off automatically when the bubbles came up to her chest, and Rose slid down until they touched her nose and rested her head on the rim of the tub. The TARDIS had adjusted the light in the room to approximate candlelight, and the soft light and comforting warmth encouraged Rose to close her eyes.

Her world narrowed to the fragrance of the bubble bath, the sensation of floating in water, and the look on her mother’s face as they said goodbye. She tried to conjure up a happier memory to counter it, but her mind was stuck on the way she’d wiped tears from her face, not caring about the ruined makeup.

Rose knew without opening her eyes that the Doctor was standing in the doorway, looking at her. “I didn’t think it would hurt this much to say goodbye,” she said without opening her eyes.

She heard him walk toward her, and sighed when he brushed the hair back from her face. “Why wouldn’t it?”

“Well…” She opened her eyes and looked up at him. “I haven’t seen Mum in three months. I thought the worst would…” A sob hitched in her chest, and she drew a deep breath and forced herself to let it out slowly.

The Doctor hummed, and Rose couldn’t tell if he was agreeing, or just acknowledging what she’d said. “Grief isn’t that straightforward,” he said. “It comes and goes, sometimes when we least expect it.” He handed her a glass of red wine and sat down on the wide tile ledge around the tub. “But it makes sense that it would hurt today. You didn’t really get to say goodbye before.”

Rose swirled the wine in the glass, focusing on the way the flickering light refracted through the ruby liquid. “I guess,” she said, her throat tight.

Rose’s forced calm worried the Doctor more than any amount of tears would have, but he didn’t want to push her to talk before she was ready. Instead, he coaxed her—however reluctantly—to the galley and prepared some of her favourite comfort foods for dinner.

After they did the washing up, Rose folded the dish towel down and stared at the counter. “I think I just wanna go to bed.”

“All right.” The Doctor held his hand out, but instead of taking it, Rose looked up at him blankly. “What?”

“You’ll come with me? Even though it’s so early?”

“Oh Rose, of course I will,” he said softly, then took her by the hand and led her to their room.
He could tell Rose’s emotions were reaching a breaking point. When she lay down beside him in bed, every muscle in her body was shaking from the strain of holding herself so rigidly. “Relax, love,” he whispered, stroking the arm that was holding him close.

She let out a shuddering sigh, and when he moved his hand to her hair, tears came out in a torrent. The switch from completely controlled to unraveling startled him until he caught an image in her mind of Jackie comforting her the same way when she was young.

The Doctor closed his eyes and pressed his lips to her temple, not stopping the rhythmic motion of his hand even when her sobs slowed and finally ceased. Her breathing continued to hitch against the onslaught of emotions, but finally, she calmed to the point where she could fall into slumber.

When he felt her drift off, the Doctor let his hand rest on the small of her back and prepared to help her fight any nightmares that might come.
When Rose opened her eyes the next morning, the Doctor was spooning her. She could tell it had been ten hours since they’d gone to bed, and the realisation that he’d stayed the whole night, even though she’d been out for much longer than they normally slept, warmed her.

“Good morning,” his voice rumbled in her ear. “What would you like for breakfast?”

Rose turned around in his arms and kissed him lightly. “Eggs and soldiers?” she suggested. It was another comfort food, one that spoke of childhood breakfasts and lazy Sunday mornings in the flat with her mum.

“Come help me make them?” the Doctor asked.

Rose heard what he didn’t say—he didn’t want to leave her alone, not yet. She sat up in bed and pushed her hair out of her face, hazy memories of the night before coming to her as she woke up.

One thing stood out. “How is it that I didn’t have any nightmares last night?”

The Doctor had been getting dressed, and he paused with one leg in his trousers. “I kept them away,” he told her, and continued getting dressed.

“How’d you do that?”

He shrugged. “Just paid attention when I could tell you were in REM sleep and projected comfort over the bond if you became distressed.”

Rose nodded slowly while she wrapped her dressing gown around her waist. “Is that something you could teach me to do?” she asked. The Doctor’s nightmares were less frequent than they had been when she’d met him, but they still came from time to time.

He blinked, and his surprise tugged at her heart. “I think so. You’re quick to pick up on new telepathic techniques, and our bond makes this one fairly simple.” He tied his tie and pulled his jacket on. “But first, let’s eat breakfast.”

After breakfast, the Doctor did some work on the TARDIS while Rose went back to their room to shower and dress. He circled the console, absently adjusting controls and wiping dust from the dials, but his mind was with Rose. She seemed to be doing better after her crying jag the night before, but he knew better than to think that was it, that she would never miss her mum again.

He wasn’t quite sure how to help her through the last of her grief. His instinct when he was upset was always to run headlong into the next adventure. He knew that wasn’t necessarily the best choice though, and he didn’t know if Rose would feel the same way.
Help me out here, he asked the TARDIS. The ship hummed noncommittally, and the Doctor groaned and raked his hand through his hair.

A second later, he froze with his hand on the back of his head, staring at the woman who’d just appeared in front of him. “What?” he asked dumbly, unable to process how anyone could have gotten into the TARDIS while she was floating in space.

The white veil covering the ginger woman’s hair floated around her waist when she spun around. A small peep of shock escaped her lips when she saw him, but her surprise couldn’t begin to match his.

“What?” he asked again.

“Who are you?” She looked him up and down, lips twisted into a snarl. “Where am I?”

A headache built at the base of the Doctor’s skull. “What?”

“What the hell is this place?”

Her raised voice at the end of that question finally shook him out of his stupor. “What?” He looked down at the console, wondering if somehow they’d landed and this woman had managed to get into the TARDIS, but no, they were still orbiting the supernova.

“You can’t do that. I wasn’t… We’re in flight!” he said, gesturing to the glowing time rotor. “That is, that is physically impossible! How did—”

She interrupted again. “Tell me where I am. I demand you tell me right now—where am I?”

The Doctor rocked back on his heels. “Inside the TARDIS,” he answered, watching closely for any signs of recognition.

She shook her head rapidly. “The what?”

Rose picked up on the twinge of annoyance and his utter bewilderment and pushed a query along their bond. “The TARDIS,” he said absently, focusing on answering Rose’s question first.

We have an unexpected… Just, come to the console room when you’re dressed.

Their visitor tilted her head, as if she thought she must have heard him wrong. “The what?”

“The TARDIS!” the Doctor exclaimed, spinning towards the console.

“The what?” she asked for the third time.

The Doctor took in a breath and blew it out slowly through his nose while running over the controls again. There must be something…

“It’s called the TARDIS,” he said calmly.

“That’s not even a proper word,” she shouted. “You’re just saying things.”

He took a step towards her around the console. “How did you get in here?”

“Well, obviously, when you kidnapped me,” she sneered.

The Doctor straightened up and stared at the woman in mute shock as she went on a tear about her supposed abduction.
“Who was it? Who’s paying you? Is it Nerys?” She tipped her head back. “Oh my God, she’s finally got me back. This has got Nerys written all over it.”

The Doctor had been looking the woman up and down during this entire tirade, trying to find something about her that would have brought her to the TARDIS, but there was nothing. He ran his hand through his hair, wishing for once that the adventure could have waited a few days.

The TARDIS chimed, and he remembered what he’d asked her for just before this woman had appeared in the console room. Is this to distract Rose? She hummed a confirmation, and he sighed. Hopefully Rose wanted to be distracted.

“Who the hell is Nerys?” he asked, finally catching up with what she’d been saying.

“Your best friend,” she hissed venomously, breathing heavily.

“Hold on… wait a minute.” A wedding dress wasn’t exactly normal attire. Maybe that had something to do with why she was there? “What are you dressed like that for?”

“I’m going ten pin bowling,” she said smoothly, then erupted in a rage. “Why do you think, dumbo? I was halfway up the aisle!”

The Doctor took a few steps back, then spun back to the console, eager to get this abrasive woman off his TARDIS as soon as possible. Whatever the ship had been thinking, he was positive that having this woman in her face wouldn’t help Rose.

She was still ranting. “I’ve been waiting all my life for this. I was just seconds away, and then you, I don’t know, you drugged me or something!”

He poked his head around the time rotor at that accusation. “I haven’t done anything!” He moved around the console, both to get away from her and to figure out what she’d done, but the ginger bride followed him.

“I’m having the police on you! Me and my husband, as soon as he is my husband, we’re going to sue the living backside off you!”

The Doctor tuned out herranting to study the scanner, trying to make sense of her appearance. Could she… Maybe we…

He looked up when he realised the last 2.5 seconds were the longest she’d been quiet since she’d arrived. She was running toward the door. “No, wait a minute. Wait a minute. Don’t!” He groaned softly when she ignored him and flung the doors wide open, revealing the newly formed nebula that had taken the place of the supernova.

She recoiled from the sight, and the Doctor shoved his hands in his pockets and joined her at the doors. “You’re in space. Outer space. This is my—” He hesitated for a moment, then apologised to the TARDIS for what he was about to say. “—spaceship. It’s called the TARDIS.”

“How am I breathing?” she asked, and her voice was actually pleasant when she wasn’t yelling.

The nebula flared in fluctuating shades of pink and gold that reminded him of Rose. I’m just getting out of the shower, she told him. I’ll be there in five minutes.

“The TARDIS is protecting us,” he said in answer to the bride’s question.

“Who are you?”
“I’m the Doctor,” he said, bracing himself for a scathing tirade about how that wasn’t a name, but it didn’t come. “You?”

“Donna,” she told him, her voice faint.

The Doctor looked her up and down, trying to distinguish her species. “Human?” he guessed, based on appearance and the traditional white wedding gown.

“Yeah. Is that optional?” There was only a hint of sarcasm in her words, and the Doctor wondered briefly if it would be possible to keep her in a state of shock until they figured out what she was doing on the TARDIS. She was far more agreeable like this.

“Well, it is for me.”

There was a pregnant pause while she looked him up and down. “You’re an alien.”

“Yeah,” he agreed.

She shook her head suddenly. “It’s freezing with these doors open.”

The Doctor slammed the doors shut and ran back to the console. “I don’t understand it, and I understand everything.” He turned back to Donna, gesturing wildly in his confusion. “This… This can’t happen! There is no way a human being can lock itself onto the TARDIS and transport itself inside.”

Even Rose hadn’t been transported into the TARDIS, and no one has a closer connection to the ship than she does.

The TARDIS hummed guiltily and he blinked; apparently, their ship had actually been attempting to pull Rose straight to her. But the point stands that this woman, whoever she is, doesn’t have anywhere near the connection with you that Rose does.

He reached into the tool belt that still hung from the console where he’d left it after he’d harnessed the supernova, and pulled out an ophthalmoscope. “It must be some sort of subatomic connection?” he rambled as he checked Donna’s eyes. “Something in the temporal field? Maybe something pulling you into alignment with the chronon shell.” There was nothing in her eyes, so he pulled back, looking her up and down again. “Maybe something macro mining your DNA within the interior matrix. Maybe a genetic—”

Donna cut him off with a slap across the face.

The Doctor put his hand to his cheek. “What was that for?”

“Get me to the church!” she ordered.

“Right! Fine!” he exclaimed, his patience running out. The TARDIS meant well, but he’d wanted to give Rose a quiet day. If this woman wanted to just be dropped back off where she came from, he could let the mystery go for once. “I don’t want you here anyway! Where is this wedding?”

“Saint Mary’s, Hayden Road, Chiswick, London, England, Earth, the solar system.”

Rose heard the raised voices as soon as she left the bedroom, but she still blinked in surprise when she entered the console room and saw a ginger woman in a bridal gown.

The stranger caught sight of her and an ugly expression crossed her face. “I knew it, acting all
innocent. I’m not the first, am I? How many women have you abducted?”

“I live here,” Rose replied evenly, trying to make sense of this loud woman standing in her home. The TARDIS hadn’t landed, so how had she gotten in?

The Doctor looked up from the console. “Ah, Rose! Good. Rose, Donna. Donna, Rose. Donna just… popped in for a visit, but we need to get her to the church. Obviously, she’s got someplace to be. No time to chat.”

He threw the lever, and the time rotor churned up and down with a sickly hum. Rose patted the nearby strut soothingly. What’s wrong, dear?

The ship didn’t answer, and a moment later, they landed with a hard thud. Donna ran to the door and pulled it open, and the Doctor followed her out, looking back inside the ship. The queasy feeling got worse, and Rose walked to the console, checking out some of the readings.

“I said, Saint Mary’s,” she heard Donna say, and she guessed the TARDIS had made one of her infamous landings. “What sort of Martian are you? Where’s this?

The Doctor stroked the side of their ship. “Something’s wrong with her. The TARDIS, it’s like she’s recalibrating!” He ran back inside, leaving their guest outside alone.

Rose rested a hand on the console. “It’s like Krop Tor,” she called out to him. “Feels like she’s got indigestion.”

He nodded, a furrow appearing on his forehead. Krop Tor was not an experience either one of them wanted to repeat. “What is it? What have you eaten?” he asked the time ship. “What’s wrong?”

Through the half open door, Rose could see Donna’s wide eyes when she caught sight of the police box. The Doctor pulled out a stethoscope and started listening to the TARDIS, not noticing that Donna was circling the ship.

“Donna?” the Doctor called out to her. “You’ve really got to think. Is there anything that might’ve caused this? Anything you might’ve done? Any sort of alien contacts? I can’t let you go wandering off. What if you’re dangerous? I mean, have you, have you seen lights in the sky, or did you touch something like something, something strange?”

Donna stood in the doorway and stared around the console room, then staggered back and looked at the ship in shock.

“Doctor!” Rose interrupted his litany of reasons Donna might have ended up in the TARDIS. He looked at her, wide-eyed, still holding the stethoscope to his ear. “She’s wandering off.”

The Doctor looked out the door just as Donna turned and started walking off. “Stay here,” he told Rose. “See if you can figure out what’s wrong with the TARDIS. I’ll get Donna to come back.”

He jogged out into the courtyard, closing the door behind him. “Donna.”

She kept walking, even when he came up alongside her. “Leave me alone. I just want to get married.”

“Come back to the TARDIS,” he offered.

Donna shook her head vehemently and they continued down the alley toward the busy street. “No way. That box is too… weird.”
“It’s bigger on the inside, that’s all,” the Doctor said, trying to make it sound like that wasn’t unusual.

“Oh! That’s all?” She looked at her wristwatch. “Ten past three. I’m going to miss it.”

The genuine distress in her voice sparked some sympathy. “You can phone them. Tell them where you are.”

To his surprise, that earned him a sarcastic, “How do I do that?”

“Haven’t you got a mobile?” he asked innocently.

She finally stopped walking, but only so she could turn and glare at him. “I’m in my wedding dress. It doesn’t have pockets.” Her words dripped with derision. “Who has pockets? Have you ever seen a bride with pockets? When I went to my fitting at Chez Alison, the one thing I forgot to say is give me pockets!”

The Doctor nodded a few times, his patience more than spent. “This man you’re marrying. What’s his name?”

Her expression shifted entirely, a sweetness crossing her face that was completely at odds with what he’d seen of Donna so far. “Lance,” she cooed.

“Good luck, Lance.”

“Oi!” she shouted, and he had to admit he maybe deserved her ire this time. “No stupid Martian is going to stop me from getting married. To hell with you!” She pivoted and ran away.

“I’m, I’m not, I’m not, I’m not from Mars,” the Doctor stammered ineffectually before taking off after Donna.

As he ran, he checked in on the women in his life. The TARDIS still seemed a little worse for wear, but he was more concerned for Rose. There was too much distance between them to communicate, but he couldn’t pick up any distress from her.

Maybe she really did need a distraction. The TARDIS hummed smugly, and he rolled his eyes. You aren’t always right, you know.

He found Donna on the kerb, trying to flag a taxi. “Taxi!” she hollered, but a cab drove by even though he was looking for a fare. “Why’s his light on?” she asked.

The Doctor pointed at another taxi with its For Hire light on. “There’s another one!”

They jogged down the street toward the car, holding their arms out to hail it. “Taxi!” Donna shouted, then yelled at them when they kept driving. “Oi!”

A pattern was forming, but the Doctor was determined to see her safely to her wedding, then hopefully back to the TARDIS so they could figure out exactly how she’d been pulled in. He scanned the street and spotted another cab coming toward them. “There’s one!”

They jogged up and down the street trying to hail cabs, and once the sixth one had driven past without even slowing down, the Doctor looked at Donna. “Do you have this effect on everyone? Why aren’t they stopping?”

“They think I’m in fancy dress.”

A cab driver honked as he drove by. “Stay off the sauce, darling!” he shouted, miming drinking.
“They think I’m drunk.”

A small blue car drove by, and two men shouted at them out the window. “You’re fooling no one, mate!”

“They think I’m in drag!”

The Doctor looked her up and down, finally realising her attire probably was putting off most cabbies. “Hold on, hold on.” He put his fingers in his mouth and whistled loudly, and immediately a cab did a U turn to pick them up. Donna hitched up her dress and climbed into the cab, and the Doctor slid in beside her.

Donna rattled off directions to the driver as soon as the door was shut. “Saint Mary’s in Chiswick, just off Hayden Road. It’s an emergency. I’m getting married. Just hurry up!”

The cabbie looked at them in the mirror. “That’ll cost you, sweetheart. Double rates today.”

“Oh, my God. Have you got any money?”

The Doctor’s mind had drifted back to Rose, and it took him a moment to register Donna had asked him a question. “Er, no. Haven’t you?”

She huffed, then gestured to her dress. “Pockets!”

“Right then,” the cabbie said, jerking the wheel. “No money, no ride.”

“But I’m getting married!” Donna protested. “There’s a whole church full of people waiting for me. I can pay you when we get there.”

The car screeched to a halt. “There you go,” the cabbie said, ignoring Donna’s promise.

The Doctor exited the car, listening with grudging admiration to the creative curses Donna was raining down on the cabbie’s head.

“And that goes double for your mother!” she bellowed as he drove off. “I’ll have him,” she fumed. “I’ve got his number. I’ll have him. Talk about the Christmas spirit.”

“Is it Christmas?” He looked around, noticing the holiday window displays for the first time.

“Well, duh. Maybe not on Mars, but here it’s Christmas Eve.”

She jerked on the Doctor’s sleeve. “Phone box!” She took off down the street, and he followed. “We can reverse the charges!”

“How come you’re getting married on Christmas Eve?”

“Can’t bear it. I hate Christmas. Honeymoon, Morocco. Sunshine, lovely.”

Donna picked up the phone, then looked at it blankly. “What’s the operator? I’ve not done this in years. What do you dial? 100?”

Oh, we don’t have time for this. The Doctor pointed the screwdriver at the coin slot so it would allow an outgoing call. “Just call them direct.”

“What did you do?” Donna asked suspiciously.
“Something… Martian,” he told her impatiently. “Now phone. I’ll get money!”

His mind was moving rapidly through the events as he ran to the nearest ATM. Donna’s appearance in the TARDIS wasn’t a random event, that much was obvious, and despite her abrasive personality and his earlier desire to just be quit of her, the Doctor knew he needed to stick with her until he figured out what was going on.

The man using the cash machine seemed to be taking forever, and he bounced on his toes. Donna didn’t seem like the kind to wait around—if she found a way to get to the church, she’d take off without him.

Finally, it was his turn. After glancing over his shoulder to make sure no one was watching, the Doctor used the sonic to manipulate the menu on the ATM and request a withdrawal from his own account. As he took the money from the machine, he heard a brass ensemble playing Christmas carols. He glanced over his shoulder and froze for a moment when he saw a trio of Santas—the same Santas he’d seen the Christmas before.

*Pilot fish.*

He kept his eyes fixed on them as they advanced slowly, but then behind him, a familiar voice shouted, “Taxi!”

The Doctor wheeled around in time to see Donna open the door to a cab that was driven by another Santa. “Thanks for nothing, spaceman!” she yelled at him. “I’ll see you in court.”

“Donna!”

The cab peeled out, and at the same time the music stopped abruptly. When the Doctor turned back around, the Santas were pointing their instruments at him, and he remembered what Rose had told him about the ones who’d tried to kill her and Mickey with their trombones.

*I need a diversion!*

The obvious answer presented itself, and he quickly pointed the sonic at the cash machine. Banknotes went flying across the street, and with the shoppers darting around to catch them, he was able to get away from the Santas and go back to the TARDIS.

“Any idea what’s wrong with her?” he asked Rose when he burst through the doors.

“No. It’s like… she’s been overloaded, or overworked or something, but that doesn’t make any sense.”

He stroked the console. “It doesn’t, but I think you’re right.”

The Doctor quickly set up a protocol for the TARDIS to track Donna’s DNA. A fast-moving dot blinked on the display, and he shifted course to intercept it.

“Unfortunately, we’re going to have to work her a bit more. Donna’s been kidnapped by something wearing a Santa mask—sound familiar?”

“I’m not likely to forget being shot at by a trombone-wielding Santa. How are we going to rescue her?”

“Like this,” the Doctor said, hitting a set of controls he rarely used and pounding one with a mallet.
“Percussive maintenance,” Rose teased, and he shot her a quick grin before focusing on the flight plan.

The familiar sound of the TARDIS dematerialising filled the console room, but with a sickly undertone to it.

“What are you doing?” Rose exclaimed.

“Following her.” The Doctor pointed to a few controls. “Here. When I say left, move this. When I say right, move that.”

He moved back to the monitor and noted with satisfaction that they were on the right path, and gaining. His satisfaction faded when sparks flew out of the console.

He reached for his mallet, but Rose put her hand on his wrist. He felt her concentrate, and a moment later, the ship stabilised a little.

“How did you…” He shook his head, both in awe and a little afraid of the connection between ship and woman. “Tell me later,” he muttered. According to the display, they should be almost on top of Donna’s cab now. “Take this,” he ordered Rose. “That’s the throttle. Keep an eye on this dot—” he pointed to the red dot on the screen—“if it looks like it’s pulling away, give us a bit more speed.”

She nodded, and he ran to the door. It was easy to spot Donna’s cab; it was the one weaving wildly in and out of traffic.

“A bit more,” he called back to Rose, and they surged forward until they were even with Donna. “That’s it! Hold her steady there.”

Donna was frantically trying to get out of the cab, and her eyes widened comically when she saw him standing in the doorway to the TARDIS.

“Open the door!” he shouted at her.

Her lips moved, and even though he couldn’t hear her, he could tell what she was saying: “Do what?”

The Doctor repeated himself, speaking as clearly as he could so she could hopefully read his lips. “Open the door!”

She pounded on the inside of the door. “I can’t, it’s locked!”

_Of course it is._ Holding onto the door frame with one hand, the Doctor pulled his sonic out of his pocket with the other. He directed it at the cab and unlocked both the door and the window.

Instead of opening the door, Donna rolled the window down and stuck her head out. “Santa’s a robot.”

_Yes thanks, I’ve noticed that._ “Donna, open the door.”

She scowled at him. “What for?”

“You’ve got to jump!”

“I’m not blinking flip jumping,” she screeched. “I’m supposed to be getting married!”

The cab sped up. “I’ve got it!” Rose called out, and the TARDIS jolted and wove through traffic.
until they were alongside the cab again.

The Doctor pointed the sonic at the Robo Santa first, rendering it incapable of doing anything but driving at exactly the speed he was going now. Then he directed his attention to Donna, who was staring at him in horrified amazement.

“Listen to me. You’ve got to jump.”

She set her jaw. “I’m not jumping on a motorway.”

“Whatever that thing is, it needs you. And whatever it needs you for, it’s not good!” he told her bluntly, seeing the moment the severity of her situation finally sank in. “Now, come on!”

“I’m in my wedding dress!”

“Yes, you look lovely! Come on!” the Doctor commanded, sighing in relief when she finally opened the door.

He held out his arms for her, but when she looked down at the motorway speeding by between them, she shifted back into the car.

“I can’t do it.”

There was real fear in her eyes under the brazen exterior, and he lowered his voice into a comforting tone. “Trust me.”

Donna looked past him, into the TARDIS. “Rose!”

“Yeah?”

“You’re really with him because you want to be? You trust him that much?”

The Doctor looked back at her, almost afraid to hear her answer, even though he knew what it would be.

“I trust him enough to marry him!” she shouted back, holding up her left hand, and the Doctor beamed at her before turning back to Donna expectantly.

Donna shook her head. “I reckon you’re both nutters,” she muttered, then launched herself out of the cab, into the Doctor’s waiting arms.

Rose laughed at the Doctor’s flustered expression when Donna knocked him to the grating. The two of them looked at each other, then Donna scrambled off of him and they both stood up and dusted themselves off.

The doors slammed shut and the controls in Rose’s hands spun without her input. “What’s happening?” she asked.

Smoke curled up from underneath the console, and the Doctor grabbed her hand and pulled her back. “We’ve pushed her a bit too far. She’ll land somewhere safe, but then we’ll be locked out until she’s gotten some rest.”

This time, the landing was rough enough to knock them all down. “Where did you learn to fly this thing?” Donna griped.

“Oh!” the Doctor said. “I’ve been flying her for 900 years, and I haven’t met anyone yet who can do
I could give it a go, Rose told him.

He glanced over at her. That’s why I said yet.

The smoke filled the console room, and the Doctor grabbed a fire extinguisher. “Out, out, out!” he said, nearly pushing Donna out the door.

Rose grabbed her jacket before following Donna outside onto a rooftop. After she blinked a few times to adjust her eyes to the sunlight, she looked around to get her bearings. In the City, she realised, spotting St. Paul’s directly in front of her.

“The funny thing is,” the Doctor said, and Rose turned around to watch him amble over to the ledge between her and Donna. “For a spaceship, she doesn’t really do that much flying. We’d better give her a couple of hours. You all right?” he asked, looking between them.

Rose nodded, but Donna shrugged morosely. “Doesn’t matter.”

“Did we miss it?” he asked, and Rose rolled her eyes at his cluelessness.

“Yeah,” Donna said on a long breath.

He scratched at his cheek. “Well, you can book another date,” he offered.

“Course we can.”

The Doctor looked helplessly at Rose, and she moved around to Donna’s other side. “What I want to know,” she said conversationally, “is how you managed to run all over the place and jump out of a moving cab, and your dress is still beautiful!”

Donna looked down at her dress and gave the tiniest smile. “That’s something, innit?”

“Yeah, it really is.” She took the other woman’s hand. “I am sorry about the wedding, though.”

Donna sighed. “It’s not your fault—either of you.”

“Oh?” The Doctor raised his eyebrows and rocked back on his heels. “That’s a change.”

The wind blew Donna’s hair into her face, and she tossed it back over her shoulder. Rose saw a speculative look enter her eyes, and she had a feeling she knew what was coming next.

“Wish you had a time machine. Then we could go back and get it right.”

The time travellers exchanged a quick glance, then the Doctor spoke up. “Yeah, yeah. But even if I did, I couldn’t go back on someone’s personal timeline. Apparently,” he added quickly.

Donna pursed her lips and looked him up and down, and Rose waited for her to call the Doctor on his rather obvious lie. Instead, she sat down on the edge of the roof and wrapped her arms around herself. Another gust of wind blew over the rooftop, and Rose shivered in sympathy—she wouldn’t want to be wearing a sleeveless dress when it was only seven degrees and blustery.

The Doctor shucked his jacket and placed it around Donna’s shoulders before sitting down next to her. She grabbed the lapels, then looked up at him. “God, you’re skinny. This wouldn’t fit a rat.”

Rose sat down next to the Doctor and bumped him with her elbow when he huffed indignantly. I like
you skinny, she told him, and grinned when the tips of his ears turned red.

“Oh!” The Doctor reached into his pocket. “And you’d better put this on,” he told her, holding up a wedding band.

Rose groaned and slapped her palm against her forehead. And he’d been doing so well, thinking to offer Donna his jacket.

“Oh, do you have to rub it in?” Donna griped.

“Those creatures can trace you,” he explained, his voice serious. “This is a bio-damper. Should keep you hidden.” She looked at him dubiously, and he handed it to her. “Just… just put it on. I promise, I’m only trying to keep you safe.”

Donna sighed and slid the ring onto her empty ring finger. “So, come on then. Robot Santas, what are they for?”

“Ah, your basic robo scavenger,” he said, as if those were an everyday occurrence. “The Father Christmas stuff is just a disguise. They’re trying to blend in. We met them last Christmas,” he said, nodding toward Rose.

Memories of the previous Christmas ran through both their minds, and Rose only listened with half an ear as she thought about everything they’d done then, and how much they’d changed since.

“Why, what happened then?” Donna asked.

They both looked at her. Was she serious? “Great big spaceship… hovering over London?” the Doctor said, and Rose could picture the ‘dribbled on your shirt’ expression on his face. “You didn’t notice?”

“I had a bit of a hangover.”

Rose looked over the river, toward Peckham. “We were over there for Christmas Day, with my mum and a mate. Mum lives—used to live on the Powell Estate.” The Doctor laced his fingers through hers, and she squeezed his hand gratefully. “They’ve moved now though… can’t exactly spend this Christmas with them.”

The Doctor diverted the conversation before Donna could ask any painful questions. “Question is, what do camouflaged robot mercenaries want with you?” Rose watched as he looked Donna up and down, like she was a puzzle he needed to solve. “And how did you get inside the TARDIS? I don’t know. What’s your job?” He reached inside his jacket pocket for the sonic.

Donna narrowed her eyes. “I’m a secretary.”

Rose watched in amusement as he scanned Donna multiple times, completely ignorant as to her increasing ire. “It’s weird. I mean, you’re not special, you’re not powerful, you’re not connected, you’re not clever, you’re not important.”

Rose leaned forward and looked Donna in the eye. “Feel free to slap his hand away, Donna. He gets a little carried away sometimes.”

What do you mean?

Doctor, you just told she’s not important.
“I mean you don’t have an important role,” he back-pedalled. “I’m sure you’re important to somebody... What kind of secretary?” the Doctor asked, quickly moving the conversation along.

“I’m at H. C. Clements. It’s where I met Lance. I was temping.” She got a faraway look in her eyes. “I mean, it was all a bit posh really. I’d spent the last two years at a double glazing firm. Well, I thought I’m never going to fit in here. And then he made me a coffee. I mean, that just doesn’t happen. Nobody gets the secretaries a coffee.”

“Shopgirls either,” Rose interjected, and the two women shared a smile.

“And Lance, he’s the head of HR! He don’t need to bother with me. But he was nice; he was funny. And it turns out he thought everyone else was really snotty too. So that’s how it started, me and him. One cup of coffee. That was it.”

“When was this?” the Doctor asked.

“Six months ago.”

“And you’re getting married already?” Rose asked. “We knew each other for more than two years before we got engaged.”

*To be fair, I knew in less than a week that I’d never willingly let you go,* the Doctor told Rose.

Oblivious to their silent conversation, Donna shrugged. “Well, he insisted.”

Rose and the Doctor shared a look that Donna didn’t catch. It was hard to imagine Donna doing anything just because someone else insisted on it, and besides—there was something in her voice that suggested it had been the other way around. Rose bit back a grin; she could only imagine how persistent Donna had been.

“And he nagged, and he nagged me. And he just wore me down. And then finally, I just gave in.”

Rose waited for the Doctor to comment on the likelihood of Donna’s story, but he let it pass. “What does H. C. Clements do?”

“Oh, security systems. You know, entry codes, ID cards, that sort of thing. If you ask me, it’s a posh name for locksmiths.”

The Doctor rocked back slightly on the ledge. “Keys,” he repeated, adding that to the disjointed list of facts he’d learned about Donna.

“Anyway, enough of my CV,” she said briskly. “Come on, it’s time to face the consequences. Oh, this is going to be so shaming.” Donna stared blankly over the City for a moment, then looked sharply at the Doctor. “You can do the explaining, Martian boy.”

The Doctor rolled his eyes, then helped Rose and Donna up. “Yeah. I’m not from Mars,” he told Donna.

Chapter End Notes
I forgot to credit my four amazing betas last week: UnabashedBird, Rudennotgingr, ascballerina, and veritascara. You make this story great--thank you!
Pencil in a Cup

Donna sighed deeply as they took the stairs down to street level. “Oh, I had this great big reception all planned. Everyone’s going to be heartbroken.”

With money for the fare, it was easy to hire a cab to take them to the hotel Donna had booked for the reception. The three of them squeezed into the backseat, and the Doctor wrapped an arm around Rose and pulled her close.

Less than a week, huh?

He grinned and brushed his lips against her temple. Somewhere between, “There’s me,” and, “Better with two,” he confirmed.

I thought you couldn’t remember when you fell in love with me? She reached for the bond and the Doctor sighed when she gave him the telepathic equivalent of a soft kiss.

Oh, I won’t admit I was falling in love. I just knew I needed you with me.

“Oh!” Donna said, pulling them out of their reminiscing. “D’you mind not being quite so lovey dovey in front of the woman who just missed her own wedding?”

“Sorry, Donna,” Rose said. She tried to pull away, but the Doctor kept her firmly by his side.

There’s not enough room back here anyway, he told her when she shot him a look, and after a moment, she settled back against him.

Rose and Donna started talking, but the Doctor tuned them out and puzzled together the things they knew so far about Donna. Appeared out of nowhere inside the TARDIS console room while we were in flight. Works for a company that makes keys. Met her fiancé six months ago when he offered her coffee.

Those all fit together somehow, but he couldn’t see how yet.

“You planning to stay in the cab all day, Doctor?” Rose asked, and he realised they’d stopped.

“No, no,” he answered, handing the cabbie a few bills while he climbed out of the car.

“Oh, I’m not looking forward to this,” Donna muttered as they approached the doors.

Noise reached the Doctor’s ears, and he cocked his head. Ah, he told Rose. I don’t think they’re quite as broken up as she thinks they are.

And sure enough, when they stepped inside, the wedding guests were having a grand time, dancing and enjoying the food. He looked sideways at Donna, who’d quickly gone from shocked to angry, if the arms across her chest were any indication.

“You had the reception without me?”

A black man who’d been dancing with a tall, blonde woman turned and said, “Donna, what happened to you?”

“You had the reception without me?” she repeated, pausing for emphasis every other word in a way that made the man flinch.
The Doctor leaned forward and waved. “Hello. I’m the Doctor, and this is Rose.”

“They had the reception without me,” she told them.

“Yeah, looks like it,” Rose agreed.

The blonde woman sneered, and the Doctor had a hunch this was Nerys. “Well, it was all paid for,” she said snidely. “Why not?”

“Thank you, Nerys,” Donna said, and he congratulated himself on his perception.

A middle-aged woman stepped to the front of the group. “Well, what were we supposed to do? I got your silly little message in the end. ‘I’m on Earth?’ Very funny. What the hell happened? How did you do it? I mean, what’s the trick, because I’d love to know.”

The entire party started talking at once, and the Doctor watched Donna out of the corner of his eye. She didn’t seem to know who to look at, as they all hurled vaguely accusatory questions at her.

Based on who was asking what, the Doctor guessed the older woman was Donna’s mother, and the man who’d been the first to speak must be Lance. Neither of them were being quite the pillars of support you’d expect.

The Doctor blinked when he heard a high-pitched sob from Donna. The sound stopped all the questions, and a moment later, Lance stepped forward and pulled her into a hug. Donna continued to cry, but she turned her head back to the Doctor and Rose and winked at them.

They smiled a little as the group burst into applause for the reunited couple. Soon, the party was back in full swing, but with Donna as the centre of attention as befitted a bride on her wedding day.

The Doctor turned to Rose and was immediately distracted by her tongue-touched smile. “So, do you still have the moves, Doctor?” she asked, swaying slightly to the music.

He took her hand and led her out onto the dance floor. “I think you’re familiar with my moves by now.”

Rose laughed when he waggled his eyebrows at her, then linked her hands around his neck. “Very familiar,” she purred, then trailed her hands across his chest before spinning so she was facing away from him.

The Doctor put his hands on her hips and matched his steps to hers for a moment, enjoying the closeness of her body brushing against his. But seeing Donna again in his peripheral vision distracted him, and without being aware of it, he stopped moving.

Rose followed his train of thought easily and turned back to face him, her playful expression gone. “Did she really just appear on the TARDIS?”

“Out of thin air,” he confirmed.

“So what are we going to do?” she asked.

The Doctor reluctantly led her off the dance floor. “Do you have your mobile?” When she handed it to him, he opened the browser and quickly typed H. C. Clements into the search box. After glancing around to make sure no one was watching, he pointed the sonic at the phone to tap into the TARDIS’ search capabilities.
When the answer popped up on the screen, he set his jaw and turned the phone so Rose could see. *H. C. Clements: Sole Prop. Torchwood.* She let loose a few choice alien curses, and the Doctor nodded.

*I couldn’t agree more.*

Torchwood had owned H. C. Clements up until its destruction six months ago, a timeline which conveniently coincided with the time Donna started working there.

*But that’s not all,* Rose pointed out. *There’s still the question of how she got onto the TARDIS in the first place.*

*We need to see footage of the wedding. If I could see what it looked like when she disappeared from the church, I might have an idea of what caused it.*

He looked around the reception and quickly found the person he was looking for: the wedding videographer, still at work. Hand in hand, he and Rose made their way around the dance floor, and soon they were standing next to him.

“What?” the Doctor said brightly. “We were just wondering if you caught the big moment on film.”

“You mean when she—” The sallow faced youth twirled his finger in an upward spiral.

“Yeah,” Rose said. “Because she said she was just… there one minute, and gone the next. But that can’t be right, can it?”

He nodded enthusiastically. “That’s exactly what happened! Here, I taped the whole thing.” He pulled a tape out of his bag and put it back in the camera and fast forwarded through the wedding preliminaries. “They’ve all had a look. They said sell it to *You’ve Been Framed.* I said, more like the news. Here we are.”

The Doctor and Rose watched tiny gold motes surround Donna as she walked down the aisle, finally carrying her upward out of the church.

“Can’t be,” they said in unison, then looked at each other in surprise.

“Play it again?” the Doctor asked.

The camera man willingly rewound. “Clever, mind. Good trick, I’ll give her that. I was clapping.”

They watched again, and Rose gasped a little. *That’s what it looked like when I left Pete’s World,* she told him.

The Doctor looked at her, then back at the screen. “But that looks like huon particles,” he said, even though it couldn’t be.

“What’s that then?” the man asked, looking eagerly between the Doctor and the image of Donna disappearing.

“That’s impossible.” The Doctor took his glasses off and stared into space. “That’s ancient. Huon energy doesn’t exist anymore, not for billions of years. So old—” The implications caught up with him as he looked over at Donna, dancing with her fiancé with a fake wedding band on her hand. “—that it can’t be hidden by a biodamper!”

“Stay here!” he told Rose, and dashed back to the foyer. Through the lobby windows, he could see
two robo scavengers, slowly approaching the building.

We’ve got two Santas on their way, he told Rose, and if I’m right, they won’t be able to tell if you or Donna are the target. Get Donna, and stay away from the windows. See if you can find an exit.

His mind was racing as he ran back to the ballroom. Rose and the TARDIS both had protested his plan to run tests on her, but if huon particles were what had brought her back, well, that explained a lot, actually. And if they were what had pulled Donna to the TARDIS… that was bad news for her.

“Donna!” She was in the middle of the room, arguing with Rose. “Donna, they’ve found you,” he told her, grabbing one of her hands and one of Rose’s as he scanned the room for an exit.

“But you said I was safe,” Donna protested.

He turned back to her, shaking his head frantically. “The bio-damper doesn’t work. We’ve got to get everyone out.”

“There’s a way out sign on the ceiling behind us,” Rose said, and the Doctor turned and spotted it.

Donna froze. “My God, it’s all my family.”

“Out the back door!” The Doctor pulled her behind him, but there were robo scavengers coming in that way too. “Maybe not.”

There was one more exit, inside the ballroom itself. But as the Doctor had suspected, the French doors were also being guarded.

“We’re trapped,” Donna said.

One of the robots raised a remote control, and the Doctor felt a spike of fear and recognition from Rose.

“Christmas trees,” she said tensely.

“What about them?” Donna asked.

“They kill,” the Doctor told her as they all ran back into the centre of the room. “Get away from the tree!” he yelled to the happy party-goers.

“Don’t touch the trees!” Donna seconded, and he noted with some surprise that she’d finally stopped arguing with everything he said.

The Doctor, Rose, and Donna were able to herd the children away from the trees, but the adults didn’t seem inclined to listen.

The mother of the bride stepped forward with an attitude that was clearly hereditary. “Oh, for God’s sakes, the man’s an idiot. Why? What harm’s a Christmas tree gonna… Oh.”

A smile crept onto her face, and the Doctor whirled toward the music he heard playing behind them. Decorations were floating off the trees, dancing in mid-air to the faint strains of classical music.

This is bad, Doctor, Rose said, and she was right. Now that the ornaments seemed to be some sort of novelty item, no one would take them seriously.

That is, no one took them seriously until the ornaments flew into the crowd, exploding into bits whenever they hit something. Then they panicked, diving out of the way, sending presents flying as
they looked for places to hide.

The blinding flashes of light produced by the festive stun grenades incapacitated the humans. Trusting Rose to keep Donna safe, the Doctor ducked between people until he reached the sound system. He hid behind the DJ’s station until it sounded like the worst of the explosions were over, then he stood up and stared down the robots lined up in front of the bar.

“Oi! Santa! Word of advice. If you’re attacking a man with a sonic screwdriver—” He held the device up, then flipped a mic in his other hand and spoke into it. “—don’t let him near the sound system.”

He shoved the sonic into the sound deck, sending high pitched sonic waves throughout the room. The guests all covered their ears, but as robots, the Santas didn’t have a chance. The sound waves shattered their masks to pieces, and as one, they collapsed to the floor.

As soon they were down, the Doctor pulled the sonic out of the deck and slid across the floor to the defunct robots, ignoring the stunned wedding guests who were coming out of hiding to survey the damage. He had a suspicion that these were something more than the ordinary pilot fish, and he was quickly proven correct.

“Look at that,” he said, throwing the disembodied head up in the air and looking back at Rose and Donna before he caught it. “Remote control for the decorations,” he said, holding it up, “but there’s a second remote control for the robots. They’re not scavengers anymore. I think someone’s taken possession.”

He turned it upside down and stared at the blinking light, indicating a signal was being transmitted to the Santa from an outside source.

“So not like last year?” Rose asked.

“Not like last year.”

“Never mind all that,” Donna interrupted. “You’re a doctor. People have been hurt.”

“Nah, they wanted you alive. Look.” The Doctor picked up one of the ornaments and tossed it to Donna. “They’re not active now.”

“All the same, you could help.”

“He is helping, Donna,” Rose explained. “We need to stop whoever is behind this.”

The Doctor leapt to his feet. “There’s still a signal!”

Rose followed him when he ran outside to get away from the interference. You were worried when you recognised the huon particles, she told him. Even before you realised it meant the bio-damper wouldn’t work.

He looked at her. It's bad for Donna, but not for you. I’ll explain it later, but first…

He pointed the sonic at the head and watched it track the signal. “If we can just figure out where it’s coming from…” he muttered as Donna joined them in the courtyard.

“Why does it want me?” she asked. “What have I done?”

“If we find the controller, we’ll find that out.” The sonic caught the signal, and he pointed it straight
up at the sky. “Ooo! It’s up there. Something in the sky.”

He thumbed the controls on the sonic, trying to scan the vessel sending the signal to the robots, but instead, the signal disappeared altogether.

“What is it, Doctor?” Rose asked.

“Not sure. It’s gone now, whatever it was.”

Lance stuck his head outside, then rolled his eyes when he saw Donna. “Donna, your mum wants to know what you expect her to tell the hotel about the exploding Christmas decorations,” he said.

The Doctor cut into the conversation without remorse. “I’ve lost the signal. Donna, we’ve got to get to your office. H. C. Clements. I think that’s where it all started.” He pivoted to her fiancé. “Lance! Is it Lance?” he asked Donna, only just realising that he’d never confirmed that assumption. She nodded, and the Doctor turned back to him. “Lance, can you give us a lift?”

If the cab had been tight, Lance’s tiny import was even worse. Thankfully, Donna took the wheel and started nattering on to Lance about the things that had happened to her, leaving Rose and the Doctor to squeeze into the backseat.

“Our kind of Christmas,” Rose told him as she leaned her head against his shoulder.

“This is only the second time we’ve had to fend off an alien invasion at Christmas,” he protested.

“Third,” Donna corrected. Cardiff and Dickens, remember?

Dickens and ghosts and a gorgeous burgundy gown—the Doctor wasn’t likely to forget. Oh. So, three for three... that does suggest a pattern.

Rose turned her face into his shoulder and giggled. Donna heard and glanced at them in the rearview mirror, a disgruntled expression on her face. “Oh, anyone would think you two were newlyweds, the way you keep hanging onto each other.”

The Doctor rolled his eyes. “Donna, it’s not like we have room to spread out.”

“Yeah, because you’d let go of Blondie there if you didn’t need to be practically sitting in each other’s laps?”

The Doctor and Rose exchanged a mutually embarrassed glance, and Donna snorted. “That’s what I thought.” She pulled into the employee carpark, effectively ending the conversation. “Here we are then,” she said, shutting off the motor.

“But why do you think our company has anything to do with what’s happened to Donna?” Lance asked.

All four of them piled out of the car and ran inside. “To you lot this might just be a locksmiths, but H. C. Clements was brought up twenty three years ago by the Torchwood Institute.” The Doctor found a terminal and he searched for clues that his theory correct. Torchwood had to be behind this, on some level.

“Who are they?” Donna asked.

“They were behind the Battle of Canary Wharf,” Rose said.
Donna looked at them both blankly. “Cyberman invasion,” the Doctor said, but she still didn’t show any sign of recognition. “Skies over London full of Daleks?”

Finally she nodded, but then she said, “Oh, I was in Spain.”

The Doctor felt his eyebrows reach his hairline. “They had Cybermen in Spain.”

“Scuba diving,” she said impatiently.

*How could she have possibly missed an invasion?* Rose asked.

*I doubt any ghosts appeared over the water,* the Doctor said. *Still…*

“That big picture, Donna. You keep on missing it.” When the computer he was working on wouldn’t give him the information he needed, he ran around the desk to another workstation. “Torchwood was destroyed, but H. C. Clements stayed in business. I think,” he pounded on top of the monitor, “someone else came in and took over the operation.”

“But what do they want with me?”

The Doctor straightened slowly. It was time to finally explain the huon particles, to both women. He looked over at his bond mate first and saw the curiosity and trepidation in her eyes.

“How can you’ve been dosed with huon energy. And that’s a problem, because huon energy hasn’t existed since the Dark Times. The only place you’d find a huon particle now is a remnant in the heart of the TARDIS.” Comprehension dawned on Rose’s face, and he gave her a slight nod. “See? That’s what happened.”

Donna frowned and shook her head, so he looked around the room and grabbed a mug. “Say that’s the TARDIS. And that’s you,” he told her, holding up a pencil. “The particles inside you activated. The two sets of particles magnetised and whap.” He dropped the pencil into the mug. “You were pulled inside the TARDIS.”

Donna looked like she was going to be sick. “I’m a pencil inside a mug?”

The Doctor rattled it around for effect. “Yes, you are. 4H. Sums you up.”

Rose put a comforting hand on Donna’s shoulder, and the Doctor went back to the computer, this time using the sonic on it to pull up the information he needed.

“Lance? What was H. C. Clements working on? Anything top secret? Special operations? Do not enter?”

“I don’t know, I’m in charge of personnel. I wasn’t project manager. Why am I even explaining myself? What the hell are we talking about?”

Lance’s sudden defensiveness was overdone, and the Doctor frowned at the computer monitor. There wasn’t any reason for Lance to be upset about the questions he was asking… unless he had something to hide.

“Calm down, mate,” Rose said. “We’re just trying to figure out what’s going on here, that’s all.”

The Doctor finally pulled a plan of the building up on the computer. Five floors above reception and one basement… But in the lift, he’d seen a button for a lower basement.

“And look at this. We’re on the third floor.”
He pushed back from the desk and ran back to the lifts, calling one up. “Underneath reception, there’s a basement, yes?” He and Rose stepped inside the glass box and looked at the rows of buttons. “Then how come when you look on the lift, there’s a button marked lower basement? There’s a whole floor which doesn’t exist on the official plans. So what’s down there, then?”

“Are you telling me this building’s got a secret floor?” Lance asked.

Lance hadn’t struck the Doctor as obtuse until now, and his suspicion grew. “No, I’m showing you this building’s got a secret floor.”

“It needs a key,” Donna said.

“I don’t,” the Doctor countered, pointing the sonic as the button marked LB until it unlocked. “Right then. Thanks, you two. We can handle this. See you later.”

Donna was shaking her head before he finished his sentence. “No chance, Martian. You’re the ones who keeps saving my life.” She stepped into the lift in front of Rose. “I ain’t letting you out of my sight.”

That left only Lance, and the Doctor was curious to see what he’d do. “Going down.”

“Lance?” Donna said.

“Maybe I should go to the police.”

The weaselly, hesitant look on Lance’s face settled it in the Doctor’s mind: the groom was definitely in on whatever was going on here.

“Inside,” Donna said, jerking her thumb toward the Doctor.

Lance stepped inside, and the Doctor wondered if anyone else could see how resentful he was. “To honour and obey?”

“Tell me about it, mate.”

“Oi,” Donna exclaimed.

Rose took the Doctor’s hand. So if the TARDIS used the huon particles to pull me back, why didn’t I end up in the TARDIS, like Donna did?

Well, she had to bring you across the Void, and that took a lot of energy. Best she could do was put you someplace safe and make sure I didn’t leave you there for too long.

That made sense, and it rang true with the slightly apologetic feeling she’d gotten from the TARDIS when she’d landed on Bad Wolf Bay.

Rose turned her attention back to what they were doing. So Lance…

The Doctor sighed and rubbed at the back of his neck. Yeah. Unless I’m wrong, he’s neck deep in whatever’s going on here.

D’you think he started dating Donna just to get close to her?

Probably.

Poor Donna.
The lift dinged, and they stepped out into a wide underground tunnel lit with eerie green lights. “Why do the bad guys always use mood lighting?” Rose asked, grinning when the Doctor choked back a laugh.

“Where are we?” Donna asked. “Well, what goes on down here?”

“Let’s find out,” the Doctor suggested.

Donna looked around the corridor. “Do you think Mr. Clements knows about this place?”

“The mysterious H. C. Clements?” the Doctor asked, still looking around to get his bearings. “I think he’s part of it. Oh, look. Transport.”

He jogged a few meters down the corridor and Rose laughed when she saw what he’d found—four Segways. The Doctor turned and walked backwards a few steps, winking at her. “You can’t tell me you’ve never wanted to use one of these.”

After taking a few minutes to figure out the controls, the four of them were rolling down the corridor, which was just barely wide enough. Rose shot sidelong glances at the Doctor and Donna, and when the other woman burst out laughing, she joined in. There was something so inherently ridiculous about the situation that she couldn’t help it, and neither could the Doctor.

Lance, as usual, remained removed from the amusement. *I really don’t like him*, Rose told the Doctor.

*Don’t blame you. He doesn’t know how to have fun at all.*

The Doctor braked in front of a heavy metal door, the wheels screeching a bit on the slick concrete. Rose glared at the discoloured sign on the door bearing the hated Torchwood logo.

It said authorised personnel only, but the Doctor was never one to obey signs. He cranked the wheel, getting the door to open. The only thing on the other side was a ladder, and Rose knew what was coming next.

“Wait here. Just need to get my bearings. Don’t do anything,” he ordered, pointing to the couple. “And don’t wander off,” he added, shooting a pointed look at Rose.

“You’d better come back,” Donna said.

The Doctor’s mouth twisted into a scowl. “D’you think I’d leave Rose behind?”

Despite knowing that probably wasn’t the kind of reassurance Donna was looking for, Rose loved that it was his automatic answer.

The three of them stood at the bottom of the ladder, watching as he climbed up. Out of the corner of her eye, Rose noticed Lance shake his head and step back. *Oh, what now?*

“Donna, have you thought about this?” he asked. “Properly?” Donna was still watching the Doctor, so Lance grabbed her arm and shook it a little. “I mean, this is serious! What the hell are we going to do?”

Donna blinked at him, then smiled. “Oh, I thought July.”

Rose coughed to hide her laughter. Donna kept missing the big picture, but seeing the look of consternation on Lance’s face, she couldn’t help but enjoy it this time.
The Doctor had finally reached the top of the ladder, and he turned the wheel on yet another hatch. Sunlight streamed into the tunnel, and Rose blinked a little at the sudden brightness.

*Rose, you won’t believe this,* the Doctor said. He sent her a picture of what he was looking at, and Rose started laughing. This whole day was so *them.*

He slid back down the ladder and brushed his hands off. “Thames flood barrier, right on top of us,” he told Lance and Donna. “Torchwood snuck in and built this place underneath.”

Donna stared at him. “What, there’s like a secret base hidden underneath a major London landmark?”

“Oh, I know. Unheard of,” the Doctor managed to say with a straight face.

“Onwards, I think,” he said, and they took the Segways again, not stopping until they reached a glass door once again bearing the Torchwood logo.

The sonic screwdriver got them in easily, and they filed into a laboratory filled with bubbling test tubes. The Doctor’s eyes glowed with excitement. “Oo, look at this. Stunning!”

“What does it do?” Rose asked, following his gaze.

“Particle extrusion. Hold on.” He darted over to another part of the lab and tapped the glass lightly with his knuckle, watching the bubbles for a moment. “Brilliant. They’ve been manufacturing huon particles. Course, my people got rid of huons. They unravel the atomic structure.” He followed the apparatus to where the liquid huon particles were released.

“Your people?” Lance asked suspiciously. “Who are they? What company do you represent?”

“Oh, we’re freelancers,” he said, gesturing to himself and Rose as he paced the room, looking for a sample. “But this lot are rebuilding them. They’ve been using the river. Extruding them through a flat hydrogen base so they’ve got the end result, huon particles in liquid form.”

He held up a bottle filled with them, and Donna stared at it. “And that’s what’s inside me?”

The Doctor turned a knob on the container, and both the liquid and Donna glowed gold. “Oh, my God!” she said.

Rose stared at him, and he blinked. Well that’s interesting… your eyes are glowing, Rose.

*And you’re sure this is safe for me?*

He looked at her sombrely. *It’s the part of the TARDIS that’s in you. It’s what brought you back to me. And if you left it there when you were Bad Wolf, then it’s safe.*

Their entire conversation only took seconds, and then the Doctor turned back to Donna.

“Genius. Because the particles are inert, they need something living to catalyse inside and that’s you. Saturate the body and then—”

His eyes widened in sudden comprehension. “Ha! The wedding!” He spun on his heels, a gleeful expression on his face. “Yes, you’re getting married, that’s it! Best day of your life, walking down the aisle. Oh, your body’s a battleground! There’s a chemical war inside! Adrenaline, acetylcholine. Wham! go the endorphins.” He punched the air. “Oh, you’re cooking! Yeah, you’re like a walking oven. A pressure cooker, a microwave, all churning away. The particles reach boiling point.
Shazam!

Rose’s gaze had darted back and forth between his exuberant gestures and Donna’s growing indignation during this spiel, so she wasn’t at all surprised when the fiery bride slapped him across the face.

He shook off the sting and looked at her. “What did I do this time?”

“Are you enjoying this?” Donna demanded.

The Doctor’s expression shuttered, and Rose realised he’d been rambling in hopes that he could distract Donna from how dangerous this was.

Donna took a deep breath and nodded once. “Right, just tell me. These particles, are they dangerous? Am I safe?”

The Doctor nodded quickly. “Yes.”

*You are a terrible liar, my love.*

Donna looked at him disbelievingly. “Doctor, if your lot got rid of huon particles, why did they do that?”

All of the forced mania drained out of him. “Because they were deadly.”

Donna heaved a few deep breaths. Rose quickly stepped up beside her and started rubbing soothing circles on her back, and the other woman smiled at her gratefully.

“Oh, my God,” she muttered, shaking her head.

*Can you fix it?* Rose asked the Doctor.

When he nodded, she tugged on Donna’s shoulder until they were face to face. “Donna, you’re gonna be okay,” she said earnestly. “The Doctor can fix this, and he will, because I’ve already lost enough people this week.”

A crackling, hissing sound filled the room. “Oh, she is long since lost,” a raspy voice said over a hidden comms system.

The wall in front of them slid up, and on the other side there was a hole—a drill shaft?—descending into the Earth.

“I have waited so long,” the voice continued, “hibernating at the edge of the universe until the secret heart was uncovered and called out to waken!”

The Doctor looked around for the source of the voice, but instead, he saw eight more robots, dressed in black robes instead of the Santa camouflage and pointing guns at them. He shifted automatically to stand in front of Rose, but when it became clear they weren’t actually going to be shot, he stepped forward to look down into the hole.

*Lance is gone,* Rose told him, and he nodded in acknowledgement.

“Someone’s been digging.” The sides were smooth, instead of scored like a normal drill shaft. “Oh, very Torchwood. Drilled by laser. How far down does it go?”

“Down and down, all the way to the centre of the Earth!”
“Really?” A furrow creased the Doctor’s forehead. “Seriously? What for?” Somehow, that didn’t sound like Torchwood. What could they find to advance the British Empire at the centre of the Earth?

“Dinosaurs,” Donna stated firmly.

The Doctor blinked down at her. “What?”

“She’s thinking of that old film, Doctor—Journey to the Centre of the Earth,” Rose explained. “But I reckon it was something a bit more… well, mercenary. You said they wanted to end Britain’s dependence on foreign oil.”

The Doctor rocked back on his heels. “Right…” he drawled. “New oil or coal reserves, or geothermal energy.”

“Such a sweet couple,” the voice said.

The Doctor set his jaw. That mocking voice indicated a threat to Rose. “Only a madman talks to thin air,” he said, starting to pace the room, “and trust me, you don’t want to make me mad. Where are you?”

“High in the sky,” she answered. “Floating so high on Christmas night.”

“I didn’t come all this way to talk on the intercom. Come on, let’s have a look at you!”

“Who are you with such command?”

“I’m the Doctor,” he declared with authority.

“Prepare your best medicines, doctor man, for you will be sick at heart.”

The Doctor steeled himself for all kinds of alien lifeforms, but he wasn’t prepared for the creature that beamed down into the drilling area. The body of a spider, with a humanoid torso and head.

“Racnoss?” he whispered. “But that’s impossible. You’re one of the Racnoss?” But the Racnoss were destroyed, he thought, staring at her in disbelief.

She bared her fangs. “Empress of the Racnoss.”

“If you’re the Empress, where’s the rest of the Racnoss?” Looking at her blood-red body, the answer came to him as soon as he asked. “Or, are you the only one?”

She hissed in delight. “Such a sharp mind.”

“That’s it, the last of your kind.” He glanced over at Rose and Donna, who were looking at the alien in revoluted fascination. “The Racnoss come from the Dark Times, billions of years ago. Billions. They were carnivores, omnivores. They devoured whole planets.”

“Racnoss are born starving. Is that our fault?” she hissed belligerently.

Donna blinked and shook her head. “They eat people?”

The Doctor had been examining the web covering the entire ceiling. “H. C. Clements, did he wear those, those er, black and white shoes?”

“He did. We used to laugh.” Donna grinned in remembered amusement. “We used to call him the fat
“cat in spats.”

Her smile disappeared when the Doctor pointed to a pair of feet sticking out of the web, wearing the same shoes he’d just described.

“Oh, my God!” she exclaimed.

“Mmm. My Christmas dinner,” the Racnoss said, clacking her teeth together.

Nausea welled up in the Doctor, and it took him a moment to realise it was coming from Rose. There was nothing he could do for her, and he really didn’t want to to draw any more attention to her, so he focused on the Racnoss.

“You shouldn’t even exist,” he said, wrinkling his forehead. “Way back in history, the fledgling empires went to war against the Racnoss—they were wiped out.”

“Except for me.”

“But that’s what I’ve got inside me, that huon energy thing.”

The Doctor looked at Donna in confusion, wondering where her sudden subject change came from. Then he spotted Lance on the catwalk holding an ax, creeping toward the Empress, and he knew what Donna was thinking.

The Empress started to look in his direction, and Donna shouted at her. “Oi! Look at me, lady, I’m talking. Where do I fit in? How comes I get all stacked up with these huon particles? Look at me, you! Look me in the eye and tell me.”

“The bride is so feisty,” the Empress said gleefully.

Lance crept closer, and the Doctor frowned. What was the point in pretending to kill the Empress now?

He’s playing with Donna, Rose told him.

But Donna still thought her fiancé was on her side, and why wouldn’t she? “Yes, I am,” she told the Empress proudly. “And I don’t know what you are, you big thing,” she said, gesturing vaguely, “but a spider’s just a spider and an axe is an axe!” Donna looked straight at Lance. “Now, do it!”

He started to swing the axe, and for a moment, the Doctor wondered if he’d been wrong. The Empress turned her head and hissed at him, and then Lance lowered the axe, and they started laughing together.

“That was a good one. Your face,” Lance told the Empress.

The Empress hissed and clacked her pincers in amusement. “Lance is funny.”

Donna looked at Lance and the Racnoss. “What?”

“I’m sorry,” the Doctor said quietly as Rose moved around to her other side.

“Sorry for what? Lance, don’t be so stupid!” she shouted “Get her!”

All the laughter disappeared from Lance’s face, replaced by derision. “God, she’s thick. Months I’ve had to put up with her. Months. A woman who can’t even point to Germany on a map.”
Out of the corner of his eye, the Doctor saw Rose take a half step toward Lance, her hands clenched into fists at her sides. A quick succession of images over their bond told him why she was suddenly so angry on Donna’s behalf: she was remembering all the times she’d been mocked and talked down to because of her lack of education.

*You are brilliant, Rose,* he told her.

She looked up at him, bright red spots on her cheeks. *An’ so’s she.*

Donna looked at the Doctor, her mouth working in confusion. “I don’t understand.”

“How did you meet him?” the Doctor asked.

“In the office.”

Rose wrapped an arm around Donna’s shoulders. “He made you coffee.”

Donna looked from the Doctor to Rose and back again. “What?” she asked.

Lance tipped his chin down and glared at her. “Every day, I made you coffee,” he said vindictively.

The Doctor sighed and turned toward Donna. “You had to be dosed with liquid particles over six months,” he told her quietly.

Donna slumped against Rose. “He was poisoning me.”

Her resigned acceptance sparked the Doctor’s anger, and he looked up at the fake groom. “It was all there in the job title. The Head of Human Resources.”

Lance’s chin jutted out. “This time, it’s personnel.”

“But, we were getting married,” Donna protested weakly.

“Well, I couldn’t risk you running off,” Lance sneered. “I had to say yes. And then I was stuck with a woman who thinks the height of excitement is a new flavour Pringle. Oh, I had to sit there and listen to all that yap yap yap. Oh, Brad and Angelina. Is Posh pregnant? X Factor, Atkins Diet, Feng Shui, split ends, text me, text me, text me. Dear God, the never ending fountain of fat, stupid trivia. I deserve a medal.”

“You deserve a punch in the face!” Rose said fiercely.

Lance’s gaze flicked up and down Rose. “And who’s going to make sure I get it, Blondie? A chav from the estates?”

Rose took a step forward, and the Doctor grabbed her elbow to hold her back. “And what’s she’s offered you?” he asked Lance, trying to pull the conversation back to Donna and away from Rose. “The Empress of the Racnoss? What are you, her consort?”

Lance pointed at Donna. “It’s better than a night with her,” he replied, and even the Doctor winced at that insult.

“But I love you,” Donna said, and the Doctor thought he saw tears glinting in her eyes.

Lance pressed his lips together in fake sympathy. “That’s what made it easy.”

Rose snarled at him, and a hint of fear finally entered Lance’s eyes. He swallowed hard and turned
back to the Doctor.

“It’s like you said, Doctor. The big picture. What’s the point of it all if the human race is nothing? That’s what the Empress can give me. The chance to go out there. To see it. The size of it all. I think you understand that, don’t you, Doctor?”

The Empress hissed. “Who is this little physician?”

Lance nodded at Donna. “She said—Martian.”

The Doctor quickly interrupted the conversation. It was the Time Lords who had destroyed the Racnoss, so he’d rather withhold that bit of information until absolutely necessary.

“Oh, I’m sort of homeless,” he said truthfully. “But the point is, what’s down here?” he asked, looking down into the shaft. “The Racnoss are extinct. What’s going to help you four thousand miles down? That’s just the molten core of the Earth, isn’t it?”

Lance tilted his head and looked down at them. “I think he wants us to talk.”

The Empress clicked and hissed. “I think so, too.”

“Well, tough! All we need is Donna.”

_You’ve got a plan, right?_ Rose asked. The Doctor sent her a quick picture of what he was planning to do, and she pressed her lips together to hide her smile.

The Racnoss swayed back and forth on six of her eight legs. “Kill this chattering little doctor man and his friend.”

To the Doctor’s surprise, Donna stepped in front of him. “Don’t you hurt him!”

“No, no, Donna,” he said, moving her aside gently. “It’s all right.”

“No, I won’t let them.” She stayed close, which suited his plan, and at the Doctor’s signal, Rose took another step toward him.

“At arms!” the Empress said, and her robots all pointed their guns at them.

“Ah, now. Except,” the Doctor said, holding his hands up.

The Empress ignored him. “Take aim!”

“Well, I just want to point out the obvious.”

“They won’t hit the bride,” she reassured him, a twisted smile on her face. “They’re such very good shots.”

“Just, just, just, just, just hold on. Hold on just a tick. Just a tiny little, just a little tick,” he said, the words spilling out on top of each other. “If you think about it, the particles activated in Donna and drew her inside my spaceship.” He pulled the container of liquid huon particles out of his pocket. “So reverse it, and the spaceship comes to her.”
The Doctor turned the knob on top of the container of huon particles, and the Empress realised what his plan was. “Fire!” she ordered.

But just as he’d planned, the TARDIS appeared around them out of nothing, and they were safely in the console room before the robots had a chance to shoot them.

As soon as the ship had fully materialised, the Doctor and Rose dashed to the console and began the process of putting her into flight. “Oh, do you know what you said before about time machines?” the Doctor asked Donna as he set the coordinates. “Well, I lied. And now we’re going to use it.”

“Off we go!” Rose pulled the dematerialisation lever, and the wonderful sound of the TARDIS’ engines filled the console room.

“We need to find out what the Empress of the Racnoss is digging up. If something’s buried at the planet’s core, it must’ve been there since the beginning. That’s just brilliant. Molto bene.”

**Doctor, stop.**

The Doctor blinked and looked at the women, sitting together on the jump seat. Rose had an arm around Donna, who… was crying?

Belatedly, he recalled that in the space of an afternoon, she’d missed her wedding and discovered the man she’d planned to marry had, in fact, been poisoning her from the day they met. He remembered all the vicious things Lance had said about Donna, and quietly moved around the console room, letting Rose comfort her.

“I just thought…” Donna whispered.

“Yeah, I know,” Rose said. “I once dated this musician. He thought he was gonna make it big, and I thought he loved me. Turns out, we were both wrong.”

“But you’ve got the Doctor now,” Donna said, “and even if I think you’re both completely mad, anyone can see he loves you.”

Rose looked up at the Doctor and smiled. “Yeah, and one day you’ll meet someone who loves you, someone who can see how brilliant you are.” Donna snorted and blew her nose. “Oh, you are,
Donna,” she said earnestly. “You are so much more than what Lance thought you were.”

“Yeah, well… I’m just a temp,” Donna said ruefully. “Guess that’s what I get for thinking a posh bloke like that would be interested in me.”

Sensing that his distraction might be welcome now, the Doctor slowly moved around the console. “We’ve arrived,” he said. “Want to see?”

Donna shrugged. “I suppose,” she said, her voice slightly hoarse.

The Doctor moved the scanner around, then pulled a face at the rather uninspiring view. “Oh, that scanner’s a bit small. Maybe your way’s best,” he said as he walked to the doors.

He turned around at the door and waited for Rose and Donna to join him. Donna still looked woebegone, and he tried to give her an encouraging smile.

“Come on. No human’s ever seen this. You’ll be the first.”

She wiped her eyes as she walked to the edge of the ramp. “All I want to see is my bed.”

The Doctor ignored that sentence. “Donna Noble, welcome to the creation of the Earth,” he told her as he pushed the doors open. He reached for Rose’s hand, and awe pulsed in both directions over their bond.

The TARDIS was hovering in the middle of a cloud of dust and rocks, lit by the blue and purple light of the nebula that would birth the Sol system. “We’ve gone back four point six billion years. There’s no solar system, not yet. Only dust and rocks and gas.” He spotted something in the cloud of light and pointed. “That’s the Sun, over there. Brand new. Just beginning to burn.”

“Where’s the Earth?” Donna asked.

The Doctor glanced over at her and was glad to see some spark of interest showing on her face again. “All around us in the dust.”

“Puts the wedding in perspective.” She swallowed hard. “Lance was right. We’re just tiny.”

“How about we don’t start any more sentences with, ‘Lance was right,’” Rose suggested. “Because he might be educated, but he still doesn’t get it.”

“Rose is right, Donna.” He nudged her with his shoulder, wanting her to feel awestruck, not insignificant. “This is what you do—the human race—make sense out of chaos, marking it out with weddings and Christmas and calendars. This whole process is beautiful, but only if it’s being observed.”

“So I came out of all this?” she asked, and there it was, the wonder he loved to see in his companions.

“Isn’t that brilliant?” The Doctor watched the fluctuating shades of blue, red, and gold in the nebular cloud. They were here for a reason, but for now, they could appreciate the beauty before them.

A large rock floated by. “I think that’s the Isle of Wight,” Donna quipped, and they all laughed.

Satisfied that she was feeling at least a little bit better, the Doctor started in on why he’d actually brought them here. “Eventually, gravity takes hold. Say, one big rock, heavier than the others, starts to pull other rocks towards it. All the dust and gas and elements get pulled in. Everything, piling in
“The Earth,” whispered Donna.

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

A spaceship floated into view as he asked that question. “Look,” Donna said.

The Doctor recognised the seven pointed star, even though he’d only seen pictures of these ships in history books. “The Racnoss.”

They watched for a moment as the ship spun in front of them, then the Doctor ran back to the console and turned the dial that would speed up time. “Hold on. The Racnoss are hiding from the war. What’s it doing?”


“Come look at this, Doctor,” called Rose.

He leapt back to the door and his breath caught at the beauty of what was happening in front of them. Attracted to its gravity, the dust and rocks of the nebula were spinning in a tighter and tighter orbit around the ship.

“Oh, they didn’t just bury something at the centre of the Earth. They became the centre of the Earth. The first rock.”

They didn’t have long to marvel at the beauty of creation. Behind them, the console banged, and the TARDIS rocked.

“What was that?” Rose and Donna asked in unison.

“Trouble,” he told them, closing the doors and running back to the console.

The TARDIS shook and rattled as it tried to resist the pull back to Torchwood’s base. “What the hell’s it doing?” Donna yelled.

“Remember that little trick of mine, particles pulling particles?” The Doctor moved a control with his foot. “Well, it works in reverse. They’re pulling us back!”

“Is there anything we can do?” Rose asked, clinging protectively to the console.

“Not really.”

Donna didn’t take that well. “Can’t you reverse or warp or beam or something?”

“Backseat driver,” the Doctor muttered. Then he remembered something that might help. “Oh! Wait a minute! The extrapolator!”

“Think it’ll help?” Rose asked as he pulled it out from under the console.

He wedged it back into position on the console. “It can’t stop us, but it should give us a good bump!”

He waited until the console room was filled with the sound of the TARDIS materialising, then he pounded on the controls. “Now!” The sound paused and the ship shuddered, then landed with a hard thud.
They all ran out into a corridor that was lit with blue light. “We’re about two hundred yards to the right. Come on!” Rose took his hand and they ran away from the Racnoss, with Donna on their heels.

About fifty yards down the corridor, the Doctor skidded to a stop in front of another bulkhead door. Unless he was wrong, this was directly across from the door Lance had used to come into the drilling room. He pulled a stethoscope out of his pocket as he studied the door, looking for a way in.

“But what do we do?” Donna asked frantically.

He listened to the door with one ear and looked at her over his shoulder. “I don’t know. I make it up as I go along.” He nodded at Rose. “But trust me, I’ve got a history. Just ask Rose.”

“But I still don’t understand,” Donna said, slightly out of breath. “I’m full of particles, but what for?”

That had been clear to the Doctor since he realised the Racnoss were behind this, but he realised he’d never explained it to Donna or Rose. “There’s a Racnoss web at the centre of the Earth, but my people unravelled their power source. The huon particles ceased to exist but the Racnoss were stuck.”

The lock on the door was more complicated than he’d expected, and he couldn’t find the spot to sonic to get the tumblers to turn.

“They’ve just stayed in hibernation for billions of years,” he said as he continued to listen to the door. “Frozen, dead, kaput. So you’re the new key. Brand new particles, living particles! They need you to open it—and you have never been so quiet.”

He spun around to an empty corridor. Immediately, he reached for Rose over their bond, but she seemed to be asleep. Well, that would explain why she didn’t call out for me when she was taken. They must have used a fast acting knock-out agent that put her to sleep before she even realised what was happening.

And if the Empress had Rose, then that made things very, very simple. Because he wouldn’t let anyone take her from him, not the Cybermen, not the Daleks, and certainly not the Empress of a long dead race.

He whirled back around to the door and pointed the sonic at the lock, then he cranked the wheel and opened the door. A robot on the other side aimed a gun at him, but the Doctor was quicker than it was. He thumbed the controls on the sonic to the right setting and pointed it at the robot’s head. Immediately, it slumped over.

Staring down at its inert form, the first bit of a plan crept into his mind.

Rose groaned when she woke up with a fuzzy head and her arms immobilised. The latter frightened her, but after struggling for a moment, she realised she was trapped in the Racnoss’ web.

She was finally awake enough to detect the Doctor’s anger and panic. M’fine, Doctor, she reassured him. Little bit of a headache from whatever they used to knock me out, but that’s all.

He calmed down, and she focused on Donna, who was moaning as she came back to consciousness. “Doctor?” she mumbled.

“Not here, I’m afraid,” Rose said ruefully. “But he will be.”
Donna looked up at her. “Yeah, I don’t reckon he’d let this lot keep you.”

Rose laughed. “Over his dead body.” All of them. She looked around the room and told the Doctor what she could about where the robots were all standing. She might be tied up, but she wasn’t a damsel in distress.

“Do you two mind?” Lance whinged. “Can you cut out the chit-chat?”

Donna turned her head to look at him. “I hate you.”

“Yeah, I think we’ve gone a bit beyond that now, sweetheart,” he said scornfully, rolling his eyes and then looking around at the web holding them all to the ceiling.

“My golden couple, together at last, and the blonde girl, my unexpected gift,” the Empress crowed. “Tell me, do you want to be released?”

“Yes!” they chorused.

She smirked up at them, constantly moving in a rhythm that almost looked like she was riding a horse. “Too bad. Activate the particles. Purge every last one.”

A robot down on the drilling platform manned the controls. Donna and Lance started glowing, but Rose just felt a bit of tingling in her fingers.

“I can see the particles in the blonde’s eyes,” the Empress said, “but they will not separate from her. Turn up the extractor.”

The tingling turned to itching, but Rose remained completely flesh coloured.

“Never mind,” the Empress said. “The particles from the couple are enough. And release!”

She looked on triumphantly as a golden stream of huon particles flowed steadily into the drill shaft. “The secret heart unlocks, and they will waken from their sleep of ages.”

“Who will?” Donna asked, looking down into the centre of the Earth. “What’s down there?”

“How thick are you?” Lance cried out.

“Oi, Lance! Another word out of your mouth and I’ll smack ya as soon as I’m loose,” Rose said.

“My children, the long lost Racnoss, now reborn to feast on flesh!” She clicked her teeth together victoriously. “The web star shall come to me,” she said, staring up at the ceiling.

Blimey, she doesn’t half go on, does she?

Rose bit back a laugh at the Doctor’s commentary. Where are you?

In the stairwell. I had to do a little wardrobe change before I could come after you.

“My babies will be hungry. They need sustenance.” The Empress threw her head back and hissed. “Perish the web.”

She raised her pincers slowly toward the web, and even Rose felt a tremor of unease. Any time now, Doctor.

Lance squirmed away from her. “Use them, not me! Use them!”
“Oh, my funny little Lance! But you are quite impolite to your lady friend. The Empress does not approve.” Two quick slices, and he fell down into the hole.

“Lance!” Donna yelled.

Rose watched him disappear in horror. Lance was an arrogant knob, but no one deserved to die being fed to spiders.

A shadow moving in the stairwell caught her eye, and she watched the Doctor get into position for whatever plan he had.

“Harvest the humans!” the Racnoss said. “Reduce them to meat.”

Since that last order was given to the ceiling, not to the robot, Rose had a sinking suspicion that the Empress’ ship was doing something up on the surface. **Still, nothing we can do about that right now.** She was more concerned by the movement she saw down in the tunnel.

“My children are climbing towards me and none shall stop them.” The Empress turned her head to look at the robed figure on the stairs—the one Rose knew was the Doctor. “So you might as well unmask, my clever little doctor man.”

He tossed off his mask and robe. “Oh well. Nice try.” He looked up at the web. “Rose, when you’re done hanging around, maybe you could get Donna down?” He pointed the sonic screwdriver at the web, and the strands around her arms loosened enough for her to wiggle them free. “I know it’s not the same as a chain over a vat of plastic, but you still got the bronze, didn’t you?”

“You bet I did.” Rose tugged at a strand of webbing, then looked at the platform the Doctor was standing on and judged how long a piece she’d need to reach it. **A bit too long,** she decided, and wrapped the length around her arm several times.

The Doctor loosened the web around them further.

“I’m going to fall!” Donna said.

“We’re going to swing,” Rose corrected. “Put your arm around my shoulders, and hold on tight.” The last bit of webbing loosened, and the two women soared through the air, landing lightly next to the Doctor.

The Racnoss cackled and hissed. “The doctor man amuses me.”

The Doctor stared at the creature who’d kidnapped Rose. “Empress of the Racnoss, I give you one last chance,” he said, the words tasting sour in his mouth. “I can find you a planet. I can find you and your children a place in the universe to co-exist. Take that offer and end this now.”

She hissed. “These men are so funny.”

“What’s your answer?”

“Oh, I’m afraid I have to decline,” she said with false regret, laughing at her joke.

The Doctor nodded slowly. He’d expected that—hoped for it a little, if he were honest with himself.

“What happens next is your own doing.”

Her amusement vanished, and she glared up at him. “I’ll show you what happens next. At arms!” she shouted at her roboforms. “Take aim! And—”
The Doctor fiddled with the controls on the remote he’d taken from the robot at the reception. “Relax.”

“What did you do?” Donna asked.

He looked over at her. “Guess what I’ve got, Donna?” He held up the remote control, a grin on his face. “Pockets.”

A crease appeared in her forehead. “How did that fit in there?”

“They’re bigger on the inside,” he said, matter-of-factly.

“Roboforms are not necessary,” the Empress said. “My children may feast on Martian flesh.”

“Oh, but I’m not from Mars,” the Doctor said, letting his anger darken his voice. Judging by the uncertainty on her face, the Racnoss was finally starting to grasp the severity of her situation. “Then where?”

“My home planet is far away and long since gone. But its name lives on.” He glared down at the Empress, knowing exactly how the answer would hit her. “Gallifrey.”

She reared up in anger, hissing and clicking her pincers. “They murdered the Racnoss!”

“I warned you. You did this.”

The Doctor pulled Christmas tree decorations out of his pocket and tossed them into the air. Several circled the Racnoss while more went down the tunnel to the planet’s core.

She caught on immediately and begged him to stop, but it was a rare day that he gave more than one chance, and between taking Rose and threatening to devour the entire planet, the Empress hadn’t earned another.

He used the remote to send grenades flying to the walls of the flood barrier, detonating those first. Once the flood began, he ordered the rest to go off. Seeing the flames in the room below, he grabbed one of Rose’s hands, and one of Donna’s. “Run!”

They slogged through ankle deep water to the TARDIS, who chimed disapprovingly when they all dripped river water on her grating. Sorry, dear, he told her. In answer, towels appeared on the railing, and he tossed one to each of the ladies and towelled his hair dry.

Donna quickly gave up on trying to wring water out of her dress and just wrapped the towel around her shoulders. “But what about the Empress?”

“She’s used up all her huon energy,” the Doctor explained as he peeled his damp jacket off and laid it over a strut. “She’s defenceless!”

“There’s just one problem,” Rose said.

He glanced over at her, watching something on the scanner with a smile on her face. “What?”

She turned it so he could see. “We’ve drained the Thames.”

Donna was the first to start laughing, and soon they were all cracking up. “Is this what your Christmases are always like?” she asked. “Only you said something about a spaceship last year, so…”
The Doctor grinned. “Kinda, yeah. It’s our holiday tradition.” He and Rose laughed again.

“Now, Donna. Where to?” She rattled off her address, and he set the coordinates. “All right. Here we are, safe and sound.”

She cracked the door open and peered outside. “That’s just bonkers, that is,” she said. “One minute we’re under the flood barrier, the next we’re in Chiswick.”

Rose joined her and ran a hand down the inside of the door. “But she’s not just a London hopper. The places we’ve seen, Donna…”

Donna shook her head and looked back at the Doctor. “And what about me, Doctor? The Empress doesn’t have any more huon particles, but do I?”

“Oh, right!” He pulled the sonic out of his pocket and scanned her. “No, all gone. And no damage, you’re fine.”

She sighed heavily, and he could see the weariness coming back as the adrenaline wore off. “I guess. But apart from that, I missed my wedding, lost my job and became a widow on the same day. Sort of.”

The Doctor felt a stab of regret. “I couldn’t save him.”

She lifted her chin. “He deserved it.” The Doctor raised his eyebrows at Donna, and she slumped. “No, he didn’t.” She looked over her shoulder in through the front window. Her parents were standing in the living room, hugging and probably crying. “I’d better get inside. They’ll be worried.”

“You’ll make their Christmas,” Rose said, and the Doctor knew she was remembering how happy Jackie had been when they’d showed up last year, once they’d gotten past the whole regeneration sickness/alien invasion bit.

“Oh, but Donna hates Christmas,” he told Rose.

“You do?”

Donna grimaced. “Yes. I do.”

He stepped back to the TARDIS and pressed a button just above the inside of the door. “Even if it snows?” he asked. The lamp on top of the TARDIS fired a bolt of electricity into the air. When it burst like fireworks, snow started falling on them.

Donna laughed and held her hands out, palm up, to catch snowflakes. “I can’t believe you did that!”

The Doctor leaned against the TARDIS, hands in his pockets. “Oh, basic atmospheric excitation.”

_Better than ash_, Rose told him, nudging him in the ribs.

Donna looked at them, and he could see contentment in her eyes. “Merry Christmas.”

“And you.”

“So, what will you do with yourself now?” Rose asked.

Donna looked down at her wedding dress. “Not getting married, for starters.” She shook the melancholy off. “And I’m not going to temp anymore. I don’t know. Travel. See a bit more of planet Earth. Walk in the dust. Just go out there and do something.”
Her words tugged at his time senses—a moment that wasn’t here yet, but would be. Rose squeezed his hand, and he knew she’d seen it too. They weren’t ready for someone to travel with them right now; they were still dealing with nearly losing each other, and with losing Rose’s family. But one day…

“You know, Donna, I have a feeling this won’t be the last time we see each other.”

She looked at him, a wry smile on her face. “I’ll make sure I’m wearing something with pockets, next time we meet.” Everyone laughed, and then she said, “Before you go, I want you to come in for Christmas dinner.”

Rose’s recoil was immediate and unmistakable, and the Doctor shook his head. “No, we don’t… we don’t really do that sort of thing,” he told Donna.

Donna raised an eyebrow. “You did it last year. You said so.” She changed tack when they didn’t agree. “And you might as well, because Mum always cooks enough for twenty.”

Rose spoke up. “Last year, we were with my mum. And this year, she’s…” The Doctor wrapped an arm around her, and she leaned against him.

Donna brushed damp hair out of her face, sending a cascade of melting snowflakes to the ground. “You said you wouldn’t lose anyone else.”

“Yeah. It’s really kind of you to offer, Donna, but I just… I couldn’t…” Her voice caught, and she took a deep breath. “The Doctor and I, we’ll have our own Christmas dinner, just the two of us.”

The Doctor wondered at the calculation he saw in Donna’s eyes. “What?”

“Nothing, it’s just… I don’t know. Seeing you, today? All those things you did? And now you’re going to do something as—as human as turkey and Christmas crackers?”

“It’s for Rose,” he said simply.

The smile that crossed her face then was different than any of the ones he’d seen before, and he realised that she was finally letting him see the real Donna. To his surprise, she tugged Rose away from him to hug her.

“You’re good for him,” she declared firmly, and Rose laughed. “I mean it! I’ve only known you for a day, but I can already tell he needs you.”

“Yeah, I do,” the Doctor agreed, taking Rose’s hand again. He looked at their new friend and said, “We’ll be off then, Donna. Good luck. And… just be magnificent.”

She laughed softly. “I think I will, yeah.”

-oOoOoOooO-

Rose watched from the jump seat as the Doctor took them into the vortex. Living in a time machine, she could put off the first Christmas without her mum indefinitely, but she suddenly found herself wanting to get it over with, like ripping a plaster off a wound. When the TARDIS started playing carols, she knew the ship agreed with that idea.

The Doctor’s eyes flicked up to the ceiling, then over at Rose. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. After all, it’s Christmas, isn’t it?” He still hesitated, so she winked at him. “Besides, I’ve had
He rested his hands on the console and leaned back. “You have, have you?”

“Yep.” Rose stood up and put her hands on his chest. “So let’s pretend it’s Christmas morning. We’ll change into fuzzy pajamas and sit in front of the tree to open our presents.”

“How do you know I’ve got something for you?” he teased.

“Mmm, just a guess.” She tugged at his tie. “Well, do you?”

“Yep,” he said. “I’ve been ready for weeks, too. I just didn’t know…”

His voice trailed off, and Rose knew what he was thinking—he hadn’t wanted to force a painful holiday on her.

She smiled at him, and if it was a little stiff, who could blame her? “Well, come on then,” she said, taking his hand and walking to their room. “I want to sit in front of our Christmas tree and drink mulled wine while we admire the lights.”

After they found matching flannel pajamas covered in whimsical snowmen waiting on their bed, the Doctor wasn’t surprised in the least to see a Christmas tree in the library. The TARDIS was apparently determined to give them the full holiday experience.

The Doctor set Rose’s present down under the tree, then looked at her empty hands with raised eyebrows. “I thought you said you had something for me.”

She fidgeted with the hem of her shirt. “I do, but it’s not easy to wrap. But when it’s time for you to open it, I’ll get it out—promise.”

They sat down on the rug in front of the fireplace. The lights were turned down low, and the fairy lights on the tree twinkled cheerily, casting a warm glow around the room. The Christmas music the TARDIS had been playing earlier started up again, and Rose hummed along with “Ding Dong Merrily on High.”

The Doctor picked up the carafe of mulled wine sitting on the hearth and poured two mugs, handing one to Rose. “It seems the TARDIS agrees with your holiday plans,” he said.

“That’s because it’s a good idea.” Rose leaned against his chest, and he wrapped an arm around her.

“I suppose we’ve already spent the day surrounded by Christmas,” the Doctor mused.

Rose snorted. “I wouldn’t really consider being shot at by robot Santas Christmas. Even if it is sorta normal for us.”

He pursed his lips. “Agreed. Next year, any robotic beings wanting to harm us at Christmas can take the form of some other holiday figure.”

“Killer snowmen?” Rose suggested.

The Doctor took a sip of his wine, letting the spices linger on his tongue. “Or deadly reindeer.”

She laughed. “Flying around, goring people with their antlers.”

“But no robot Santas.” They shared a smile, and then the Doctor said, “Still, the day wasn’t boring at least—even if fighting off an alien invasion on Christmas Day is becoming almost commonplace.”
“I’ve been wondering something, Doctor,” Rose said. “How come the huon particles in me didn’t… buzz or whatever like Donna’s did?”

The Doctor poured more wine for both them, then settled back against the hearth again. “Well, yours are actually part of your biology,” he explained. “The part of the TARDIS she left behind in you.”

“Right…”

“Think about it this way. You’ve got iron running through your entire body, in your blood. But when someone holds a magnet up to you, do you notice?”

“I do now.”

The Doctor laughed and tickled Rose. “Before you changed, cheeky minx.”

“So, it’s like the difference between the iron in my blood and wearing jewellery with iron in it? Donna was just… wearing huon particles like an accessory.”

“Exactly!”

They sat quietly for a moment, listening to the sounds of the fire crackling behind them and the music, still playing softly.

“You know, I seem to remember that we came in here for a reason,” Rose said.

“I think you just want to see what I got you for Christmas.”

“Well, can you blame me?” Rose stretched her legs out in front of her, and he could see her wiggling her toes inside her socks.

The Doctor took her mug from her and set them both down on the coffee table, then got Rose’s present from under the tree. She weighed it in her hand and shook it gently.

“Oh, it rattles a little.”

“Be careful with that!” he squawked as he sat back down beside her. “There are some delicate…” Rose raised her eyebrows and he clamped his lips shut before he gave away the contents of the package. “Just… be careful. Actually, why don’t you just open it?”

Her finger was sliding under the edge of the paper before he finished the sentence, ripping it open. “I’ve been wondering for weeks, ever since I started working on yours,” she muttered.

“Working on?” the Doctor repeated. “So it’s something you made me?”

Her gaze shifted to the sofa, and he realised his gift must be hiding somewhere in the room. “Oh, I guess you’ll find that out soon enough,” she said. “But first!”

Rose crumpled the paper and tossed it on the floor, then opened the box. The Doctor held his breath as she tipped it up and slid the slender metal tool out into her hands.

“My own sonic screwdriver?”

“It’s possible to save the universe without one, as you’ve proven more than once, but it does make things a bit easier.”

Rose pushed the button and the diode on the end shone with a violet light. “How many settings does
“The full set. You already know quite a few of them, and the ones you don’t, I can tell you about as you need them.” The Doctor clenched his hands in the fibres of the rug. “Do you like it?”

She looked up at him, affectionate exasperation on her face. “I love it,” she assured him. “Been wanting something like this for a while, actually. Thank you, Doctor.”

“You’re welcome, Rose.”

She brushed a kiss over his lips, then jumped to her feet and jogged over to the sofa. The Doctor watched in bemusement as she pulled a thin package out of the space between the sofa and the wall. When he saw her heft it up, his eyes widened as he realised why she hadn’t wanted it under the tree. The size and shape belonged, unmistakably, to a painting.

“Your turn now.”

The Doctor stood up and took the wrapped canvas from her. She’d told him once that she’d planned on sitting A-levels in art, but he’d never really thought about her artistic talents.

“Well, go on,” Rose prodded, and he realised he’d been standing there holding the painting for over a minute.

The paper came off easily, and the Doctor sucked in a sharp breath when the painting was revealed. The rocky terrain, spires, and arches of Makuyu were immediately recognisable, but it was the glorious splash of colour in the sky that caught his eye. She’d depicted the planet as it had looked when they’d arrived just before dawn, with the Medusa Cascade still visible in the grey morning sky.

“I call it *Forever*,” Rose told him. “D’you like it?”

His gaze swung up to meet hers, surprised she even had to ask. The painting evoked memories of one of the most perfect moments of his very long life. “I love it,” he said hoarsely. “We can hang it in our bedroom.”

Rose blushed and fiddled with the hem of her shirt again, her gaze dropping to the floor. Her pleasure with his obvious appreciation of her gift rang clear over their bond, and suddenly he needed to make sure she understood exactly how much it meant to him—the painting, their life, her love—all of it.

He carefully set the painting down on the coffee table, then turned his full attention to his bond mate. It only took the slightest encouragement from him—a finger under her chin and the softest telepathic nudge—for Rose to look up at him. His hand moved automatically to brush a strand of hair back over her ear, and then he let it rest under her jaw while his thumb stroked the apple of her cheek.

“Rose Tyler.” He intended to say more, but his throat closed when her eyes darkened at the tender inflection in his voice. Rose took half a step towards him, and the Doctor’s hand shifted to the nape of her neck, the silky strands of her hair sliding between his fingers. He leaned down and bumped his nose against hers before she tilted her head back and captured his lips.

“Doctor. *My Doctor,* she said, and her claim sent the same shiver down his spine that he’d felt the first time she’d stated it. He opened his mouth to deepen the kiss and pulled her closer with a hand on her waist.

The Doctor flicked his tongue lightly against Rose’s lips, then slipped it into her mouth when she parted them under that gentle persuasion. One of her hands moved underneath his pyjama top to
brand his skin with her human heat, and in retaliation, he sucked her tongue into his mouth, drawing a low moan from her throat.

When Rose finally pulled back for air, the Doctor realised the TARDIS had dimmed the lights, leaving the library illuminated only by the fire and the lights on the tree. He had a sudden desire to see that flickering, twinkling light dance over her bare skin. Rose picked up on the thought almost immediately and hummed in agreement before moving in for another kiss.

The Doctor groaned when she pressed herself against him, and he dropped his hands to her hips to keep her from moving away. Still, as much as he ached to make love to her, he had a vague recollection that there was something he’d wanted to tell her, and with effort, he cleared his mind enough to remember what it was.

*Rose Tyler,* he whispered into her mind as he tugged her down to the soft carpet in front of the Christmas tree, *you are my forever.*
“I want to go through the flat,” Rose said during breakfast the day after Christmas. She’d been putting it off, taking advantage of the fact that with the TARDIS, they could go back to the day after Canary Wharf at any time.

“Are you sure you’re ready for that?” the Doctor asked. “You just said goodbye to her three days ago.”

“That’s part of why I want to do it. Now that I’ve said goodbye, I need to… I can’t have it hanging over my head, constantly dreading it. I want to get it over and done with so we can move on. Besides, the council will want to let the flat to someone else, and there are things I wanna keep.”

“We do have a time machine, Rose,” he reminded her gently. “This doesn’t have to be done right now.”

“But it does,” she told him, looking him in the eyes. “Because until I do it, the flat will always be there, a place that belongs to us even though Mum isn’t here anymore.”

The Doctor nodded and set the coordinates. “I’ll land us in the living room, so we can avoid any questions you don’t want to answer.”

Stepping out into the living room was one of the hardest things Rose had ever done. She’d lived in this flat her entire life. So many things had happened in this room, and now she was here to pack it up.

She looked around, at a complete loss as to where to start. There were pictures, and mementos, and a lot of things she just didn’t care about.

“We don’t need to do this all in one day,” the Doctor said. “We can pay six months’ worth of rent on the flat and take our time going through everything.”

Rose raised an eyebrow. “Where are you going to come up with six months’ rent?”

He shuffled his feet on the carpet. “Remember how I said I used to work for UNIT?”
It took Rose a minute, since their encounter with the Slitheen had been over three years ago, but she found the memory and nodded.

“Well, my salary went into a bank account that I never really touched.”

“Are you saying you’re rich, but you’ve been making me pay for chips all this time?”

“It’s not like I carry a bank card or anything!” he protested, and she loved the high pitched squeak in his voice. “I mean, I can use the sonic for the same thing…”

“I love the idea,” Rose said, interrupting the oncoming babble. “I guess this time I’ll just go through and get the personal things that I only left here so my room would still feel like mine, and to keep Mum from complaining about me leaving.”

“Anything I can do to help?”

Rose handed him a bin bag. “You can clean out the kitchen. Get everything out of the fridge and freezer. Anything that hasn’t spoiled, take into the galley. Pitch everything else. Oh, and go through the cabinets too. Just… get all the food out of the kitchen.”

The Doctor walked into the kitchen and looked around, wondering where to start. Remembering the bag in his hand, he opened the refrigerator and pulled everything out, setting it on the table so he could sort what to keep and what to pitch.

Sorting through the food took longer than the Doctor thought it would, though it might have gone faster if he hadn’t kept shooting glances at the door, half his attention focused on Rose. Her determination to tackle all the difficult things at once worried him—Christmas the day before, and cleaning out the flat today.

*But Christmas went just fine,* he reminded himself as he started tossing the spoiled food, container and all. After a quiet dinner, they’d gone back to the library and Rose had told him some of her favourite stories from Christmases while she was growing up. She’d teared up once or twice, but mostly, it had been a nice day.

After getting rid of everything they wouldn’t want, he rummaged around in the drawers and found shopping bags. He packed up the remaining perishables and carried them into the TARDIS, allowing himself a little sample of the raspberry jam as he put it away.

The Doctor gradually became aware of a melancholy overtone creeping into Rose’s emotional state. Leaving the rest of the kitchen work undone, he went to check on her.

She was in Jackie’s room, holding her parents’ wedding picture. “Doctor… I don’t understand…”

He sat down beside her. “What don’t you understand?”

“Yesterday, we saved Donna’s life. We save people’s lives all the time. So why…”

“Why did saving your dad’s life cause such a paradox.”

Rose nodded.

“You’re thinking that if your dad here had been alive, you mum wouldn’t have gone to… the parallel world,” he said, barely managing to avoid their private name for that world.

“Well, yeah,” she said, raising her eyebrows.
“That doesn’t automatically follow, though, Rose,” he pointed out. “He could have died in any number of ways between 1987 and now. If they’d both been here, maybe they would have still been at the flat instead of with us at Torchwood, and they could both have died here. You’re playing a what-if game, love, and that’ll drive you mad.”

She scowled at him. “Still doesn’t answer my original question.”

He sighed; he’d been hoping she wouldn’t catch that. The answer was likely to lead to something he knew he needed to tell her, but despite recognising that months ago, he wasn’t any more ready than he had been then.

The Doctor pulled one of her hands from the frame and laced her fingers through his. “First and foremost, for you to save his life broke the laws of Time. You changed something in your own personal history. When we save someone, their families and friends don’t have memories of them being dead.”

“Oh,” Rose said, her voice small. “So this is like why I couldn’t touch baby me, right? Because then there would have been two versions of me? Little baby Rose who grew up with a dad, and the me who didn’t?”

“Not exactly. When you touched baby Rose, you triggered the Blintovich Limitation Effect. If an individual crosses their own timeline, time will attempt to correct itself to prevent them from changing anything in their past.” The Doctor rubbed at his forehead. “Which I realise sounds like exactly what we’re talking about here, so just trust me when I say there is a slight difference. This is more… your memories would have rearranged to include a life with your father, but since you’re a time traveller, you would have remembered both versions. Since you didn’t possess time senses then, your lack of natural ability to handle two conflicting sets of memories created a vulnerable point in time.”

“Okay then.” Rose blinked twice, then nodded slowly. “You said that was the first reason. What else?”

“Pete—erasing your dad’s death caused a paradox because growing up without a father played a huge role in shaping who you would become,” he told her.

Rose tilted her head and frowned. “What difference does that make?”

The Doctor took a deep breath. “Your life would have been totally different if you’d had a dad, Rose. So different that… you probably wouldn’t have quit school. You’d have finished, gotten your A-levels because you’re brilliant, and then you would have gone to uni.”

She drew herself up and her chin jutted out. “Wait, so saving his life caused a paradox because Time needed me to be a chav from the estates? Excuse me, but Time can just—”

The Doctor put his finger over her mouth before she could finish that sentence. “You wouldn’t have been working at Henrik’s.”

He saw the moment that sank in, and he saw the choice in her eyes. It was the same choice she’d made months ago when she refused to leave with her mother, and it was the same choice she’d reiterated more than once since then.

“I never would’ve travelled with you,” she breathed.

He nodded, suppressing a shudder at the grim possibility. “And that would have been a huge paradox, because if you hadn’t travelled with me, you couldn’t have gone back and saved your
father.”

Rose nodded slowly. “It wasn’t just Dad not dying that was the paradox,” she realised. “It was me saving him.”

“That’s it.”

They sat quietly for a few minutes, and then Rose turned slightly on the bed so she was looking directly at him. “Doctor, a few minutes ago, when you mentioned Henrik’s…”

The Doctor swallowed hard.

She took his hand. “Tell me.”

It was time, whether he felt ready or not. “Let’s go to the kitchen,” he suggested. “I haven’t taken the tea to the TARDIS yet.”

Thankfully, Rose allowed him time to gather his thoughts. She let him make the tea this time, and he called upon his memory to follow Jackie’s procedure exactly. Her smile when she took a sip was all the reward he needed.

“So, Doctor…”

“I never should have taken you to 1987,” he said abruptly, jumping into the explanation from the very beginning. “I should have known it was a temporal tipping point and explained it to you, but I didn’t.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Well, partly I wanted to make you happy, but also…” It hurt his pride to admit the next part. “After the war, my time senses were dulled. You know what it’s like when you’re too close to an explosion, and you can’t hear for a while?” Rose nodded. “Well, the Time War was the biggest temporal explosion possible. I had some of my senses still, like the ability to feel the turn of the earth, but time was… hard to see.”

“That must’ve been awful,” Rose said, taking his hand.

“It wasn’t fun, I can tell you.” The Doctor shook his head and took a few slow breaths to ease the pain the memories stirred. “So there I was, a Time Lord with no time senses, with nobody in my head, and all the guilt of having ended two races.”

He felt a shift in Rose’s emotions, and squeezed her hand before pulling his back. “It made me reckless,” he said. “I went looking for danger, and I found it at Henrik’s that night. Remember what I told you when I sent you away from the store?”

The Doctor saw her wrinkle her nose out of the corner of his eye. “You were gonna go up to the roof and blow up their whatsit. You said…” Her voice faltered. “You said you might die in the process.”

The Doctor gripped his mug tightly between his hands and stared down at the tea. “It was a fitting way to die, I thought. Saving the Earth one last time.” He puffed his cheeks out. “But then I met a human girl who’d stood her ground even though she was terrified, who’d come up with a logical theory about what had happened.”

“Doctor.”
Rose’s voice trembled, and he chanced a glance at her. He was too much of a mess to interpret her tear-filled eyes, though, so he lowered his gaze back to the table.

“I still had to stop the Autons, but when I got up to the roof to lay the charges, I made sure I gave myself an exit route. I didn’t know why, but I knew I had to see you again.”

A thought occurred to him. “You know, I think that was probably my time senses returning,” he said. “The first timeline I sensed after being blind for weeks, and of course it was yours.”

He heard her suck in a breath and quickly pushed on with the rest of his story, wanting to get it all out before he lost his courage.

“I might very well have died there that night if I hadn’t met you,” he told her, his voice raspy. “You were meant to be there, and I was meant to meet you.”

Rose didn’t say anything for a long time, and the longer she stayed silent, the more nervous the Doctor became. He’d essentially just told his bond mate that her father had died because he’d needed her in his life.

Her emotions surged over the bond, washing through him. He’d been trying to ignore them, not wanting to know how his confession made her feel. But he couldn’t mistake her compassion for anything else.

“I wasn’t supposed to be the one to take the lottery money down that day. In fact, I almost forgot to do it,” she told him. “But one of the other girls had a date and asked if I’d do it for her. I’ve been thankful for that so many times… now I’m even more grateful.”

The Doctor drew his eyebrows together. “Rose… are you… why aren’t you upset?”

“Why would I be?”

“Because… all your life… this is… How can you choose me over your dad like that?”

Her eyes softened. “That’s not a real choice, Doctor,” she pointed out. “S’not like you put two boxes in front of me and said I could only have you or my dad. I lost Dad long before I met you.”

“Yes but—”

Rose shook her head. She wouldn’t let him once again take the blame for something that was not his fault. “You just told me not to play what-if games, Doctor.”

A knock at the door startled them both. “I guess I’d better see who that is,” Rose said reluctantly. “They’ve probably seen the light under the door and know someone’s here. If I don’t open up, they’ll call the police about a break-in.”

“I don’t think it’s one of your neighbours, Rose,” the Doctor said as he stood up.

Rose stopped in the doorway and turned around. “Who else would it be?”

“Do you feel anything… off, or wrong?”

Rose knew he meant in her time senses, and she focused inward. There was… something. A point that refused to be moved.

She frowned up at him. “What is that?”
The Doctor grimaced. “That is Captain Jack Harkness.”

There was a prickly feeling in Rose’s mind that was demanding she get away from the source of the distortion to Time, but she set her jaw and walked toward the door. Wrong or not, Jack was still her friend.

He’d already started to walk away, but he turned around when he heard the door open. “Jack!” she said, enjoying the shock on his face.

“Rosie!” he squealed, then ran to her and caught her up in a hug.

Rose laughed at his enthusiasm and forced down the headache. “D’you want to come inside?” she asked once he put her down.

“You bet! I never expected to see you here. In fact, I didn’t know if…”

His sentence died out when he saw the TARDIS in the middle of the living room. “The Doctor’s here with you then?” he asked, and Rose didn’t miss the hint of resentment in his voice.

“Right here, Jack.”

Rose watched as the two men looked at each other for the first time since the Game Station.

“You left me,” Jack said coldly. “I woke up on the floor of that station and heard the TARDIS engines going. I ran, but I got to Floor 500 just in time to see the TARDIS disappear.”

The Doctor stuck his hands in his pockets and looked down at the floor. “I’m sorry,” he said, Rose beamed at him. “Do you know… have you figured out…”

“Do you mean, have I figured out I can’t die? Yeah, I started to work that one out when I got in a fight in Ellis Island. A man shot me through the heart. Then I woke up.”

Rose covered her mouth with her hands. *Oh, Jack.*

The Doctor’s response was a little less sympathetic. “Jack,” he said, and she could hear the warning in his voice.

If Jack heard it, he ignored it. “I thought it was kind of strange. But then it never stopped. Fell off a cliff, trampled by horses, World War One, World War Two, poison, starvation, a stray javelin. In the end, I got the message. I’m the man who can never die.”

“Jack, stop,” the Doctor ordered.

Rose’s sob broke the uncomfortable silence in the room. Jack turned toward her. “Don’t worry, Rosie,” he said. “At least if I can’t die, you don’t have to worry about ever saying goodbye—not that your designated driver ever takes the time to say goodbye anyway.”

“Jack Harkness, shut up!”

“Or what, Doc?” Jack retorted. “There’s nothing you can threaten me with, remember?”

Rose spun around and ran down the hall to her childhood bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

“What was that about?” Jack asked, staring down the hallway.

The Doctor gripped the doorframe with both hands, trying to restrain himself from striking Jack. Any
compassion he’d felt for Jack, any guilt at the way they’d left him, those had all disappeared when he’d made Rose cry. Her guilt pulsed over their bond, and he ground his teeth together.

“Why can’t you ever just listen?” he growled. “I tried to tell you to shut up, but you just kept going on and on. Rose is in her bedroom crying because she thinks it’s her fault you’re like this.”

A furrow appeared on Jack’s forehead. “Why would she think that?”

The Doctor took a deep breath, then pointed at the couch. “Sit,” he ordered. The former Time Agent stared at him, but apparently something in his expression told him he’d been pushed as far as he could go today.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” the Doctor asked. “Before waking up and hearing the TARDIS.”

“I was facing three Daleks. Death by extermination. And then I came back to life.” He looked at the Doctor. “Do you know what happened to me, Doc?”

“Rose.”

“I thought you’d sent her back home.”

“She came back,” the Doctor said reverently, still unable to believe how far his precious girl had been willing to go to get back to him. “Opened the heart of the TARDIS and absorbed the Time Vortex itself.”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “What does that mean, exactly?”

The Doctor focused on what Bad Wolf had meant for Jack. The rest of it was Rose’s story to tell, if she wanted. “No one’s ever mean to have that power. If a Time Lord did that, he’d become a god. A vengeful god. But she was human. Everything she did was so human,” he said proudly. Then he looked at Jack, finally coming to the core of the explanation. “She brought you back to life, but she couldn’t control it. She brought you back forever.” He shrugged. “That’s something, I suppose. The final act of the Time War was life.”

Jack’s gaze darted down the hallway. “But she feels guilty.”

“Well, you didn’t exactly help with your tirade against me,” the Doctor said, some of his earlier anger coming back. “I told you to stop, Jack. I told you more than once, and you kept going.”

“I was angry.” Jack rubbed at his jaw. “I wanted you to know what the last 150 years have been like for me.” He glanced ruefully up at the Doctor. “I should have recognised your ‘protect Rose’ look.”

The Doctor didn’t even pretend to be surprised he had such an expression. “You should have.”

“I should go in there and apologise, huh?”

“She’s been crying,” the Doctor repeated. “I would have kicked you out without another word, except I knew she would want a chance to apologise to you, for doing this to you.” He looked at the former Time Agent fiercely. “Don’t you dare let her think this was her fault.”

To his credit, Jack looked offended at the suggestion. “I won’t,” he promised, then got up and walked to Rose’s door.

Rose rolled over and sat up on her bed when she heard the knock at her door. “Come in, Jack,” she
said wearily, knowing by the feeling in her head that it wasn’t her Doctor at the door.

He pushed the door open slowly and Rose was surprised to see remorse in his eyes when he walked inside. “Rosie, I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t know… I was angry at the Doctor for just leaving me there, and I let my mouth run away from me.”

Rose sighed and shoved her hair out of her face. “You don’t have to apologise for being angry, Jack,” she said tiredly. “After all, it’s my fault you can’t die.” She winced when she remembered the list of ways he’d said he’d died.

Jack sat down next to her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “Not your fault,” he corrected. “That implies I blame you for it.”

His wrongness felt worse when he was this close, but Rose wouldn’t hurt him further by moving away from him. “You blamed the Doctor until you knew it was me.”

“I blamed the Doctor for abandoning me. I thought I could guilt him into an apology if I told him… all of that.”

Rose wasn’t sure she believed him, but she was ready to move on. “Did he tell you why he left you there?”

“No, he was too busy telling me why I’d been a complete ass.”

“You should ask him. Let him explain.” Jack stiffened, and she rushed to explain. “I’m not saying it was right, and you can bet I let him have it when I found out. But… well, it wasn’t the way you think it was, Jack.”

“I’ll go back out there if you come with me.”

Rose looked at his outstretched hand, then into his eyes. She knew she was being manipulated, but truthfully, she wanted to be there when the Doctor explained. She took his hand and let him pull her up, then she opened the door to her room and followed him back out into the living room.

The Doctor was standing near the kitchen door, and judging by the way his hair was standing up, he’d been running his hands through it the way he did when he was anxious about something. Rose felt his question in her mind when he saw her. She hesitated for a moment then settled on the telepathic equivalent of a noncommittal shrug.

The skin around his mouth tightened, and Rose quickly turned to Jack. Their friend was watching them with a strange look on his face, and she knew he’d picked up on the changes to her relationship with the Doctor.

“I told Jack that he’d need to ask you to explain why we left him on the Game Station,” she said, trying to steer the conversation where she wanted it to go.

The Doctor sighed and pushed himself off the wall. “Let’s sit down,” he suggested, settling on the sofa with his arm around Rose and letting Jack take the chair.

There was a speculative gleam in the former conman’s eyes, and the Doctor knew he wanted to ask about his relationship with Rose. He shook his head subtly and Jack nodded.

“So what was it, Doc?” he asked. “I’ve been asking myself for 150 years, and I still don’t understand why you left me there.”
“When Rose brought you back, she did something that I didn’t even know was possible. She made you… You’re a fixed point in time and space. You’re a fact. That’s never meant to happen.”

“What do you mean?”

The Doctor tipped his head back and stared at the ceiling while he tried to find a way to explain. “You know what a fixed point is, right?” he asked, assuming a former Time Agent would be familiar with the concept.

“Yeah, it’s something that must always happen, that can’t be changed.”

“Most of time is a continual flow,” the Doctor said, slipping into his rapid lecture voice. “Time is… time is the current that carries us all along. And within time, if you’re a time traveller, you can make changes, redirect the current. But when time reaches a fixed point, it will always correct its course so that event happens.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

“Well, most sentient beings are affected by time. Things happen to us. But you, Jack… Time can’t change you. You… you’re simply here. Always. No matter what time does. And that just feels wrong.” The Doctor looked at his friend. “That’s why I left you behind. It’s not easy even just looking at you, Jack, because you’re wrong.”

“Thanks,” Jack said sarcastically, at the same time as Rose sent the Doctor a mild reproof. He sighed. “I just explained it. Time Lords are trained to avoid fixed points. Fixed points in time I can handle, even though they make my time sense flash a constant mauve alert at me. But a living fixed point? That’s just…” He blew out a breath. “You felt wrong, and I was already dying. I didn’t know if I could handle…”

Jack’s eyes shifted from the Doctor to Rose, then back again. “Could she change me back?”

Rose’s guilt surged again, and the Doctor glared at Jack. “She can’t,” he said in a clipped voice. “The power was killing her, so I took it out of her.”

“But if the Vortex was killing her, then… Oh.” Comprehension dawned on Jack’s face. “That’s when you regenerated. You took it out of her, and it killed you instead.”

The Doctor nodded. “I shouldn’t have left you behind. I knew that then, but I was too weak to do the right thing.”

“Wait a minute!” Rose turned to look at the Doctor. “How come Jack knew about regeneration?”

“I didn’t tell him, Rose,” the Doctor assured her.

“When I worked for the Time Agency, there were all these rumours about Time Lords—almost myths, really,” Jack said. “According to one of them, they had the ability to survive death by changing every aspect of their appearance. So, when he identified himself as the Doctor earlier, I knew that myth must be true.”

The three friends sat in silence for a long moment, then Jack grinned. “Moving on to happier topics, how long’s this been going on?” he asked, pointing at the two of them.

The Doctor groaned. “Jack…”
“What? I worked hard to get you two together; I think I deserve to know what finally made it happen.”

_Do you want to tell him all of it?_

_No._ Rose trusted Jack, but she was tired—so tired. Thinking about the Game Station always made her tense; no matter what the Doctor said, she still felt a little bit guilty for making him regenerate. She didn’t have the energy right now to go into the whole story of how Bad Wolf had changed her.

“Let’s just say I came to my senses,” the Doctor said, leaving out the story of Bad Wolf and Rose’s telepathy and how it had actually taken him three whole months to come to said senses.

Rose laughed and leaned into him, letting his love and support buoy her. “Where are you living these days, Jack?” she asked. “We’ve had the TARDIS looking for you for months, but her scan hasn’t turned up any results yet.”

“Well, she must have wanted it to happen like this,” Jack said. “I have a hard time believing your ship couldn’t find me in Cardiff.”

“Cardiff!” the Doctor exclaimed.

“Yeah. I spent a lot of time thinking about how I could find you again, and the most logical answer was to stay someplace I knew you would come back to. The rift is still the best place in the galaxy to fuel up, isn’t it?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“So when I woke up and realised you were gone, I used my vortex manipulator to go back to Cardiff. I was aiming for the early 21st century, but I ended up in 1869 instead—with a burned out piece of tech. I hung around the neighbourhood though, waiting for you to come back. I never expected to run into you in London.”

“So why did you come to the flat today?”

Jack leaned forward and looked down at the floor. “I don’t know how long ago it was for you, but the Battle of Canary Wharf was just a few days ago,” he said quietly. “I know the two of you were right in the middle of it, but I didn’t know… I wasn’t sure if you’d made it. I thought your mum might know, Rose.”

Rose blinked back tears. “Mum’s gone, Jack. That’s why we’re here today—to start cleaning out the flat.”

“Oh God, Rosie. I am so sorry.”

“Not like that,” Rose said hurriedly, realising what Jack thought. “The battle… the Cybermen came from a parallel universe, one where my dad is still alive. She went through to be with him.”

There was a long silence before Jack cleared his throat. “So, outside of handling the odd Dalek invasion, what have you two been up to? And please, be as detailed in your answer as you want.”

“Jack…”

Jack held up his hands. “Hey, I left the amount of detail up to you.”

Rose’s guilt finally ebbed away, though it didn’t disappear entirely. “Well, we killed Satan,” she said
“Oh sure,” the Doctor grumbled. “Start with the most impressive story. You’re supposed to work up to that, Rose.”

For the next few hours, the three friends swapped stories of their adventures since they’d seen each other last. Rose pulled a hidden box of biscuits out of the kitchen, along with fresh tea, and Jack told them a little about the friends and family he’d made over the years.

It was mid afternoon when Jack set his cup down and pushed himself to his feet. “I hate to say goodbye, but I’m in town on business and I’ve got to get back to work. I shouldn’t have stayed away this long, actually.”

Rose walked him to the door, with the Doctor following a few paces behind them. “Do you have a mobile number, Jack?” she asked. “Next time we’re fuelling up, we’ll give you a ring.” He nodded, so she opened the contacts on her own phone and handed it to Jack.

“I guess I can get rid of my Doctor detector,” he mused as he typed his information in.

“Your what?” the Doctor asked.

“The hand you lost last Christmas,” Jack said.

“Ergh, Jack!” Rose wrinkled her nose. “You’ve been carrying a hand around with you?”

Jack hesitated, then pulled the pack off his back. “Got it right here,” he said.

“Give me that,” the Doctor demanded. “Honestly, do you know what kind of damage could be done if my biological code fell into the wrong hands?”

“Actually, I do,” Jack shot back. “Which is why I liberated it from the wrong hands.”

The Doctor grunted. “Well, thank you for that.”

Jack put his hand on the doorknob, then looked at the Doctor. “And what about me? Can you fix that? Will I ever be able to die?”

Rose looked at the Doctor hopefully, but he shook his head. “Nothing I can do. You’re an impossible thing, Jack.”

Somehow, Jack managed a laugh. “Been called that before.” He stepped into the Doctor’s personal space and kissed him on the cheek, then bent down over Rose and repeated the gesture. “You take care of him,” he ordered. Mischief glinted in his eyes. “And if you need any help with that, just give me a call.”

The Doctor put his hand on the door. “Goodbye, Jack,” he said with a long-suffering sigh, closing the door on their friend’s laughter.
Chapter 6: Stuck With You?

The next day, the Doctor pretended to fiddle with the TARDIS while he did some thinking. Talking to Jack had put life in perspective. Jack had lived hundreds of years, would probably live thousands more, but he still lived in the here and now. He fell in love, had children, everything. He didn’t put things off with the idea that he could always get around to them later.

The Doctor ran his fingers over the navigational controls, adjusting dials without really looking at what he was doing. He hadn’t exactly been putting off completing his bond with Rose, but he’d had a nebulous idea of waiting for the perfect moment. Jack’s example reminded him that the moment would always be perfect, because it was him and Rose. He loved her, and she loved him. What was the point of waiting?

The TARDIS chimed, and he looked down at the console. A smile spread across his face when he realised he’d set the coordinates for the perfect planet to go to to buy wedding bands.

Suddenly eager, he let the TARDIS in on the part of his plans that required her help. When the time rotor flashed in acknowledgment, he patted the console and went back to their room to talk to Rose.

The door to the en suite was open, and from the light splashes he heard, he guessed she was taking a bath. “You’re thinking too loud,” Rose called out. “Come tell me what’s on your mind.”

The Doctor hung his jacket on the back of the chair and took his shoes and socks off before stepping through the door. Rose was neck deep in bubbles, with her hair piled on top of her head. The hot water had turned her skin pink, and the entire room smelled of a tropical flower only found on Altus.

“Sit,” she said, pointing to the wide ledge running around the tub.

He obeyed her, facing her with his back to the wall and his left leg stretched out on the ledge in front of him. “You know, I didn’t have a bathtub this nice until you moved into my room.”

She patted the wall. “The TARDIS loves me.”

“That she does.”

The Doctor looked at Rose for a moment, trying to figure out how to ask if she was ready for the full marriage bond. “I was thinking we could go shopping today,” he finally said.

She raised an eyebrow. “Okay… what for?”

He reached down and scooped up a handful of bubbles, then blew on them gently and watched them...
float around the room, afraid to see the look on Rose’s face when he told her what he was thinking. “Well… wedding bands?”

Surprise coloured her emotions, and he chanced a look at her. Her mouth hung open, and she’d gone completely still.

“We don’t have to,” he said quickly. “I just thought… well, like you said when we bonded, we’ve already done the living together part. And we’ve promised each other forever and really, what more is marriage than a promise to stay together and share your lives forever? But if you want to wait a little longer we can.”

By the end of his ramble, the Doctor was talking to the hands clasped tightly in his lap, and Rose knew she needed to stop him before he convinced himself she didn’t actually want to be with him. She splashed a bit in the tub, considering how to voice her one concern.

“Before I say yes and ask you what I should wear,” she said finally, loving the hope in his eyes when his head snapped up to look at her, “I need to ask you a question, and I need you to—” She cut herself off. The Doctor wouldn’t lie to her.

He was looking at her expectantly, and she took a deep breath. “When you first explained the bond to me, you said losing a bond mate was painful. And I know what happened at Canary Wharf hurt. Would it… will it hurt more…” Rose couldn’t finish the sentence. It wasn’t the romantic pre-wedding conversation of her dreams, but it was important to her that they talked about this.

“What will it feel like when one of us finally dies for the last time?” he finished. She nodded, and the muscle in his jaw twitched. “I don’t know the exact details. Bonds were a private matter, and outside of the etiquette surrounding them, they weren’t discussed much.”

Rose felt the Doctor’s hesitancy to finish the thought, but after letting out a slow breath, he continued.

“But based on how I felt at Torchwood, I can guess it would be very painful. Remember, in a full marriage bond, there’s a part of me living inside of you. When I die, that part will be… gone.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed, and Rose frowned when she felt him pull away from her. “What are you thinking right now?” she asked.

“Well… if you’re not sure…” He met her gaze directly for the first time since he’d suggested they get married, and the vulnerability in his eyes surprised her. “I mean, I can understand that it’s more intense than a human marriage.”

Rose blinked up at him, then her brain caught up with what he was saying. “You think… Oh, you daft Time Lord.” She scooted to the end of the tub and took his hand in her soapy one. “I was worried about you.”

It took a moment for the words to sink in, but when they did, the Doctor rested his head against the wall. Of course she’d been thinking about him. Rose Tyler, always trying to protect him.

“Doctor?”

He squeezed her hand. “I think we need to get one misconception out of the way,” he told her quietly. “You’re used to thinking that I’ll outlive you, but the truth is, Rose, that it’s likely to be the other way around.”

Rose shifted in the tub, and water sloshed over the edge, getting the Doctor wet. “What?”
“There’s a limit on regenerations. Twelve, and I’ve already used nine. We don’t know for sure that you can regenerate, but assuming you can, and that you’ve got the same regeneration cycle as a Gallifreyan Time Lord, you will live a lot longer than me.”

He hadn’t talked about this before because honestly, the idea hurt just as much as the thought of outliving her. He felt a wave of sadness from her before she pushed it away.

“I don’t believe that,” she said stubbornly. “My longer lifespan might be a natural side effect of my encounter with the Vortex, but it happened when I was Bad Wolf. I could do anything, and I would’ve made sure, somehow, that our lifespans matched.”

That was a possibility he hadn’t considered, and he had to admit she was right. “Then neither one of us need to worry about leaving the other one behind, and this is a moot point,” he answered reasonably.

A smile crept over Rose’s face. “And if it’s a moot point, and it was my only concern…”

It took the Doctor a moment to trace the conversation back to the beginning. “You mean…?” he squeaked, eyes wide.

“Let’s get married, Doctor.”

oOoOoOoOo

After they both put dry clothes on, the Doctor took them to the best jewellery market in three galaxies. “I meant it when I said I wanted wedding bands,” he told her as they stepped outside, hand in hand.

They were parked in a grassy field beside a well-used path, and as they walked into town, Rose asked the Doctor a few questions she’d wondered about. “What happens during the bonding? Is there a ceremony involved?”

The Doctor didn’t answer immediately, and when he did, he spoke slowly. “There is, but…” He shot her a sidelong glance. “Remember your comments about my people sucking the fun out of things?”

Rose laughed.

“I think we can skip most of it. There’s a lot of pontificating on how this match will be beneficial to the future of Gallifrey and what it will mean for our respective Chapters and Houses. Not only is that boring, it simply doesn’t apply to us.”

A few houses appeared along the path, and then they entered a busy town, right on the high street. “But there are parts you’d like to keep?” Rose asked, noticing he’d said “most of it.”

The Doctor nodded. “The vows pertaining to the actual bonding.” He tilted his head. “And maybe we could each add our own bit to it, if we want?”

Rose bit her lip. The Doctor was the one with the silver tongue, not her. The thought of writing vows that would equal whatever he came up with was a little… daunting.

On the other hand, this was her wedding to the Doctor, her best chance to tell him how much he meant to her. And that was a topic on which she felt she could be reasonably eloquent.

“Yeah. I’d like that.”
The Doctor smiled at Rose, but her attention had been diverted to the shop windows. They were in the heart of the jewellery district now, and the displays were truly dazzling. When she stopped and stared at a pair of earrings, the Doctor made a note to himself to come back and buy them later when she wasn’t looking.

The shop they needed was just around the corner. “Here we are,” he said, holding the door open. “Juvelo and Juvelo. The things they can do with metal won’t be matched for over a thousand years.”

The shop was airy and well-lit, and a woman stood at the counter, a jeweller’s loupe in hand. She set the tool and down and smiled at them. “My name is Xira; how can I help you today?”

“We need to buy a pair of wedding bands,” the Doctor said. “Rose’s will need to match her engagement ring, and we’ll want them both engraved.”

“Well, first let me see this ring.”

Rose pulled it off and handed it to her, and she hummed thoughtfully. “This will be difficult to work with,” she said.

The Doctor cajoled her with a smile. “That’s why we came here. Like I said, best metal workers in the galaxy.”

The jeweller preened a little before her serious expression returned. “Might I ask—if you already have a ring as fine as this one, what is the need for an additional band? The very best job I could do would not enhance its appearance.”

“She’s got a point, Doctor,” Rose said before the Doctor could protest. “Couldn’t we just engrave this band and call it my wedding ring?”

He tried to think of a reason, outside of the simple desire to give her a ring during their ceremony, but nothing came to mind.

Rose rested her hand on his arm. *I love this ring, just as it is. It’s absolutely perfect. We can still get it engraved, and you can put it on me again during our wedding.*

A new idea came to the Doctor. He nodded at Rose, then turned to Xira. “You’d be willing to do the engraving, even though we’re not buying a wedding band?”

“I assume you’ll still be purchasing a band for yourself?” Xira asked. The Doctor nodded. “Given that, I can do the engraving on your fiancée’s ring for a minimal charge.” The metallurgist turned to Rose. “What kind of ring would you like to give him?”

Rose looked up at her bond mate, then back at Xira. “Would you give us a moment?” she asked.

The woman moved away, and the Doctor raised his eyebrow at her. “What is it, Rose?”

“I was thinking about the engraving… could we have it done in Gallifreyan?”

He swallowed hard. “Circular Gallifreyan would be a bit difficult for most engravers to manage, but Juvelo and Juvelo can do it. Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” Rose took a scrap of paper out of her pocket. “I asked the TARDIS to translate your inscription for me.”

When they turned back around, the jeweller had pulled out trays of thicker laurium wedding bands,
suitable for people with larger hands. Most of them had channel cut stones or engraved patterns decorating them, but Rose drew the Doctor over to the tray of plain bands.

“Which one do you like best, Doctor?”

The Doctor looked them over and tried a handful on. Finally he settled on a band with bevelled edges and a brushed metal finish. Xira sized him, and then opened her order book to write down all the information.

On the order form, the Doctor carefully wrote out the inscription he wanted in Rose’s ring in circular Gallifreyan. She refused to show him what she’d selected, and he wondered what she and the TARDIS were up to.

After they paid, Rose turned to the Doctor. “Can you give us a minute?” she asked. “I’ve got one more instruction I want to give, and I want it to be a surprise.”

The Doctor agreed more readily than she’d expected, promising to meet her back at the TARDIS in half an hour. Rose gratefully accepted his unusual lack of curiosity, and after he left, she quickly told the jeweller what she wanted.

Xira raised her eyebrows. “That’s rather unorthodox.”

“But it’s possible?” Rose pressed.

“Oh, absolutely. And he chose a good ring for it.”

Rose sighed in relief. “Then here’s what I want the engraving to say,” she said, handing her the folded up piece of paper.

Xira examined it carefully and nodded. “Your rings will be ready in three days,” she told Rose.

“I’ll let the Doctor know,” Rose promised. “Thank you, Xira.”

She still had ten minutes left to wander before she needed to make her way back to the TARDIS, so Rose took her time strolling through town, mentally writing her vows as she went.

The Doctor was leaning against the doors when she returned home. “Xira says the rings will be ready in three days,” she told him.

He nodded and unlocked the door. “I believe this is one of my favourite uses for a time machine,” he told her as he carefully set the coordinates. For once, the TARDIS landed gently, and the Doctor bounced on his toes and jogged toward the door.

“Who’d’ve thought the 1200 year old Time Lord would be so impatient?” Rose teased.

“Not impatient,” he countered. “Ready.”

Rose started to ask, “Ready for what?” as she followed him out of the TARDIS and along the same path they’d walked just half an hour ago. Then she recognised the anticipation coming off him in waves, and she realised what he meant. Ready to be married. Ready for the full marriage bond.

That’s right, he whispered in her mind, and Rose shivered at the idea of a bond more intimate than the one they already shared.

The bell on the door jingled when they entered the shop and a dapperly dressed man looked up from the case where he was inspecting an amethyst necklace. “Hello, I’m Zeyyn. How can my sister and I
“Hello, Zeyyn!” the Doctor said. “I’m the Doctor and this is Rose Tyler. We’re here to pick up our wedding rings.”

“Ah! I’ve been waiting for you,” he told them. “My sister showed me the fascinating inscriptions you asked for—we’ve never seen a language like this before.”

“There aren’t many people who have,” the Doctor said, and Rose felt a pang at the sadness in his voice.

“Well, it certainly produced a beautiful inscription,” Zeyyn said. “I have your order ready right here.”

When the Doctor started to take both boxes, Zeyyn held one back and handed it to Rose instead. “I believe your bride would like your ring to be a surprise,” he said, winking at Rose.

“Thank you, Zeyyn,” Rose said, tucking the box safely away in her jacket pocket.

“So, where are we going for our wedding?” Rose asked once they were back in the TARDIS.

“That’s my surprise,” the Doctor said, laughing when Rose stuck her tongue out at him. “The TARDIS and I have a room prepared; she’ll help you find it when you’re dressed.”

Rose’s heart stuttered when she realised they were doing this now—not later that evening, or the following day, but now.

The Doctor took a half step back from her. “Is that okay?” He rubbed at the back of his neck. “I suppose it’s fast, but…”

“It’s fine, Doctor. My little human brain is just trying to keep up with all the changes, that’s all. I mean, up until six hours ago, we’d never even discussed our wedding, and now we’re doing it this afternoon.”

His eyes searched hers. “Are you sure? We could… wait a few days, maybe invite some people…”

“I don’t want anyone there but us.” She smiled at him, hoping to change the subject. “So, you never answered my question from before. What should I wear?”

His smile returned to full force. “Whatever you like,” he answered, his eyes gleaming. “You’re always gorgeous, no matter what you’re wearing.”

Rose kissed him on the cheek and started to leave, but he snagged her arm. “What is it, Doctor?” she asked.

He pulled a jewellery box out of his jacket pocket. “Since you didn’t let me get you a wedding ring…”

Rose had a feeling she knew what he’d gotten her, and when she opened the box, she wasn’t surprised to see the simple sapphire earrings she’d admired earlier. “Thank you,” she told him, hugging him tight for a moment, before spinning around to run to the wardrobe room.

She was as excited today as she had been the first time she’d visited it, looking for a dress to wear in Naples. Stepping inside the massive room, she looked at the three levels and seemingly endless aisles of clothing and knew she would never find what she wanted on her own.
Help me find the perfect dress? she asked the ship as she set the earrings down on the vanity just inside the door. You know what he has planned. The TARDIS chimed, and Rose smiled. She didn’t even know what she wanted. Something somewhat Earth-traditional? Something more like a formal dress? She’d take every bit of help the sentient ship could offer.

The TARDIS led her deep into the wardrobe room to a small alcove filled with white dresses. Looking at the racks, Rose nodded in agreement. She’d not been sure before, but seeing the wedding gowns, she knew she wanted at least one thing about her wedding to be what she’d imagined it would be like as a girl.

Well, not quite like she’d imagined as a girl, because thankfully her tastes had changed since she was ten years old and dreaming of billowing satin skirts and lace flounces. Rose flipped through the racks of simple chiffon dresses, occasionally pulling one out and holding it in front of her as she looked in the mirror, then putting it back on the rack.

Looking for her wedding dress without her mother or any of her friends felt strange, and melancholy slipped into her thoughts, despite her best efforts. “It’s not like planning a wedding with Mum would’ve been that much fun,” she reminded herself. Imagining the inevitable rows over almost every aspect of the day made it a little easier to deal with her mother’s absence.

Rose took a deep breath and pushed both the thoughts and the gowns out of the way. Now at the very back wall of the room, she spotted a dress hanging slightly skewed on the rack and pulled it out. Though it was obviously a modern dress, the high waist and wide straps and the way the skirt draped reminded her of the outfit she’d worn in ancient Rome. A silver cord wrapped around the waist beneath the pleated bodice four times before it knotted, letting the ends dangle down to the knee. She was sure the Doctor would tell her the dress was more Grecian than Roman, or that the straps were completely wrong, but she was also sure he would know immediately why she’d chosen the dress.

Holding the dress up so she wouldn’t step on the short train, she carried it to the front of the wardrobe room, snagging a pair of gladiator sandals from the shoe closet on her way by. Inside the bureau, she found a white strapless bra and matching knickers, and she quickly changed out of her every day clothes and into the outfit she would be married in.

Her hair clip from Telera was on the vanity, and after spending a few minutes at the vanity curling her hair, she pulled her hair onto the top of her head in a mass of ringlets. The only thing left to complete the outfit were the earrings the Doctor had given her. She quickly put them on, admiring the simplicity of the figure eight setting.

Taking a step back, she looked at herself in the mirror. This was it. No flowers, no veil—just a beautiful dress and a single piece of jewellery.

Jewellery. Rose bent over and picked her jacket up, rummaging around in the pocket until she laid hands on the ring box. She flipped it open and smiled when she saw Xira had done exactly as she asked.

Without anyone to hold the ring for her, she started to slide it onto her thumb. Then she caught sight of the cord around her waist; a minute later, the ring hung beside her hip.

Take me to him, Dear, Rose told the TARDIS as she stepped out into the corridor. The lights on her right flashed, and she followed the ship’s directions until she stopped in front of a door she’d never seen before.

The butterflies in her stomach fluttered wildly, and she pushed the door open. Warm sunlight
streamed out into the hallway, and Rose blinked as she stepped into the meadow of red grass.

The Doctor was waiting under a silver tree, wearing his usual brown suit. Rose picked up her skirt and walked toward him, enjoying the surprisingly cushy feeling of the ground beneath her feet and the way the cool grass brushed against her toes and ankles. He held his hand out silently and she took it, looking around at the room he and the TARDIS had created for their wedding.

When she saw the twin suns in the burnt orange sky, she knew what this room was a representation of. “This is what it looked like?” she whispered, afraid to break the solemn atmosphere with a normal speaking voice.

“This is how I choose to remember it. During the war…” His voice trailed off, and Rose understood.

“It’s beautiful.”

“Yes, it was.”

A gust of wind swept up the hill, rustling the grass and drawing a chiming sound from the leaves. The sound pulled the Doctor out of the daze he’d been in since he’d entered the room thirty minutes earlier.

He looked at Rose, and his hand tightened around hers when he took in her gown. “You are… breathtaking,” he told her, brushing a curl out of her face. “My Fortuna.”

Her face lit up, and he knew he’d said the right thing. “You remember, then.”

“I can’t imagine I’ll ever forget anything I’ve shared with you, but that trip to Rome stands out. It was the first time we kissed when we were both aware and in control of our actions.”

He tightened his fingers around hers, then showed her the strip of gold cloth in his other hand. “Traditionally, the officiant would bind our hands,” he told her. “Since we’re alone, we’ll have to work together, each using our free hand.”

Rose smiled at him. “Better with two,” she said softly.

The Doctor swallowed past the sudden lump in his throat. His left hand let go of Rose’s right hand to take it in his own right, and then he started winding the ribbon around their clasped wrists, letting Rose take it from him to pass it over the top.

“The ribbon represents Time,” he told her as they continued. “To a Time Lord, there is no higher power. Even though we gained some mastery over it, Time is ultimately uncontrollable.” An image of Rose, haloed by the golden light of the Vortex, came to the front of his mind, and he grinned at his bond mate. “For most of us at least,” he added, and she laughed.

Unable to knot the ribbon, they let the ends drape loosely over the top of their joined hands. “Ready?” the Doctor asked. Rose nodded, and he took a deep breath.

“Every individual has their own timeline—their own path they will follow through life,” he said. “By coming today to fulfil our bond, we are agreeing to bind our timelines together, to share a future even though our pasts have been walked alone. Rose, do you consent?”

Her gaze burned into his, brown eyes flecked with gold. “I do.”

The Doctor’s hearts sped up, but the ceremony wasn’t over yet. He squeezed her hand and gave her a quick telepathic prompt, and she nodded.
“Doctor, do you consent to bind your timeline to mine and share a future with me?”

“I do.”

Rose blinked rapidly, and the Doctor used his free hand to wipe away the tear that managed to escape. “Ready?” he whispered, and she nodded.

“Rose, when I met you, I was broken and alone. From the moment I took your hand in that basement—oh, such a long time ago—you helped fill up the loneliness and teach me how to live again.

“Falling in love with you was as inevitable as it was unexpected. I was…” His voice faltered, and he cleared his throat before continuing. “I was terrified by how much I needed you in my life. One fragile human, holding the hearts of the last Time Lord. What would happen when I lost you?

“I tried to run, and I tried to send you away. Today, I promise I won’t do either ever again. As our hands are now bound together by cloth, so also will our lives by joined by Time. Your future is my future, from now until forever.”

Rose blinked back a few more tears, then swallowed and smiled up at him. Until she’d listened to him, she’d still been unsure of what to say, but now the words came easily.

“Doctor, when I met you, I was lost. My life was nothing more than work, chips, and evenings at the pub. I knew I wanted more, but everyone around me said it was impossible. Then you took my hand and pulled me into your mad life, and I’ve never looked back—not even when you tried to send me away.”

She raised an eyebrow, and the Doctor smiled sheepishly.

“From our very first date, I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life travelling with you. Then I fell in love with you, and I wanted to spend forever with you... travelling was an added bonus.

“I promised you forever before we knew how close to the truth that was.” She paused for a moment, then said, “Doctor, I’m never gonna willingly leave you—you’re stuck with me.”

“Stuck with you, Rose Tyler?” the Doctor said, his voice rough. “That’s not so bad.” He squeezed her hand, then said, “Now, let’s undo this and give each other our rings.”

Together, they quickly unbound their wrists. Then the Doctor pulled Rose’s ring out of his pocket and took her left hand. “We’ve promised to stay together and love each other forever, and this ring is a symbol of those vows.” He pushed the ring back onto the finger where it had belonged since he’d given it to her four months ago.

Rose pulled her hand from his, and the Doctor watched in bemusement as she lifted the end of the cord wrapped around her waist. He chuckled when he realised what she’d done—always so clever, his Rose.

When she got the ring free of the cord, Rose took his left hand and slid the ring halfway on. “When you gave me my ring, you said you wanted wedding bands because they’re an outward sign that we belong together. Well, this is it, Doctor.” Rose pushed the ring the rest of the way onto his finger. “The Doctor and Rose Tyler... forever.”

The Doctor stared down at the Gallifreyan engraved on the outside of his wedding band. “D’you like it?” Rose asked. “I thought, since no one else will be able to read it and it looks so pretty...”

He put a finger over her lips. “I love it.” He twisted the band around his finger, reading the entire
inscription. ‘‘Forever my Doctor.’ The TARDIS translated this for you?’’

Rose nodded. ‘‘She did do it right, didn’t she? I don’t think she would have played a prank on me with something like this.’’

The Doctor smiled. ‘‘She did it exactly right.’’ He pointed at the second string of symbols. ‘‘Did she tell you what this says?’’

‘‘Um… no… And I don’t know Gallifreyan grammar, but it’s the last word, so I assume it says Doctor.’’

‘‘Not quite. That’s my given name, with the ending that indicates possession. I can’t remember the last time I used it, and I don’t plan to now, but it was a part of my past I hadn’t shared with you. Now you know—or at least you know what it looks like.’’

‘‘What does mine say?’’ Rose started to pull her ring off so she could look at the inscription, but the Doctor stayed her hand.

‘‘We still have some unfinished business, Rose Tyler,’’ he said, his voice deep and full of meaning. Rose shivered. ‘‘How do we do this?’’ she asked.

‘‘I’ll teach you,’’ he promised. ‘‘And when we’re connected, I can show you what I had engraved in your ring—kill two birds with one stone.’’

‘‘That’s such a romantic metaphor,’’ Rose drawled, laughing when he flushed and tugged at his ear.

‘‘Yes, well…” He placed his hands on her temples, and Rose mirrored him. This is the last time we’ll need to be touching to go into each other’s minds, he told her. Last chance to change your mind—there’s no going back after this.

Don’t want to go back. I just want to go forward, with you, forever.

The Doctor’s hands trembled on her temples. I love you, he told her fervently, then took a deep breath to get control over his emotions. Completing a marriage bond requires a third telepathic presence. Normally this would be the officiant, but the TARDIS will facilitate for us.

The presence of the TARDIS strengthened until Rose felt like the time ship was holding both her mind and the Doctor’s safely in her hands.

That’s it exactly, Rose.

Rose felt the Doctor weaving his mind around hers, and she followed his example, as best as she could. He and the TARDIS helped when she wasn’t sure what to do, guiding her until she knew, intuitively, that there was only one step remaining.

The Doctor hovered over the telepathic centre of her mind, and with the TARDIS’ help, Rose found the matching place in his. She looked to him, waiting for a cue as to what to do next, and to her surprise, a third set of vows followed.

I take you as my bond mate, sharing my life, my mind, and all I am with you. I promise never to lie to you, and to be true to our bond through regeneration after regeneration, until we are finally parted by death.

The words came easily to Rose. I take you as my bond mate, sharing my life, my mind, and all I am
with you. I promise never to lie to you, and to be true to our bond through regeneration after regeneration, until we are finally parted by death.

She could feel his deep joy and a pleasure that went far beyond happiness, and then he said, *Now, Rose.*

With the TARDIS’ help, she pressed into the telepathic centre of his mind, feeling him do the same thing in hers. The awareness of him that their bond had given her flared and deepened. She knew more than how he was feeling or what he was thinking; she knew *him*.

*Yes. Oh, Rose. You are my forever.*

The words were familiar—he’d whispered them in her mind only two days ago as they’d made love in front of the Christmas tree. But this time, a series of circular characters spun through Rose’s mind when he said them, and she knew without being told that this was the inscription in her ring.

Inside her mind, Rose felt things continue to shift. The natural walls and barriers that had existed before between her mind and the Doctor’s disappeared. They were still two individuals, but now they occupied one space.

Rose watched as her own barriers expanded to include the Doctor, while his did the same for her. When the process was complete, she looked around the new mental landscape. *It’s like a double layer of protection,* she realised. *Anyone attacking us would have to get through both of our barriers to get to either of us.*

*Exactly. What hurts one, hurts both, so what protects one, protects both.*

The Doctor’s hand moved to cup her jaw, and Rose met his lips with hers in a tender kiss. The cascade of emotions flowing over the bond was overwhelming, and she couldn’t tell if the tears she tasted were hers, or his.

Far too soon for Rose’s taste, the Doctor eased out of the kiss. She tried to convey her disapproval with his actions, but instead of kissing her again, he chuckled and shook his head.

“You’ve given me the chance to experience so many of my culture’s traditions regarding our engagement and wedding,” he told her. “I think it’s only fair that I give you at least one of your traditions.”

Before Rose could ask what he meant, the Doctor swung her up into his arms and carried her to the door. “Where are you taking me?” Rose asked him as he stepped out into the corridor.

“There are some human traditions I like,” he said. “Carrying the bride over the threshold, and the wedding night, for example.”

Chapter End Notes

I’ve been dying to post this chapter for months. This sets up one of the most fundamental differences between this story and most series 3 with Rose stories, and I can’t wait to start letting you in on some of the changes.
Tyler, Tyler, and Jones

Chapter Notes

If you're interested in their honeymoon, that's in *Hope is Where Forever Begins*. In addition to the expected fluff, there's also a bit more explanation of how the marriage bond works compared to the provisional bond.

It was months before the Doctor and Rose came back to Earth, figuratively speaking at least. The Doctor hadn’t intended to visit Earth in the literal sense either, but the TARDIS seemed to have taken it into her head that Rose should meet more people from his past.

A visit with Sarah Jane was first, and Rose was glad to see the other woman was genuinely happy about the changes in their relationship. After skipping around the galaxy a bit more, the TARDIS landed them at the Chestertons’ home, and later, Rose met the Brigadier and his wife, Doris. The Doctor grumbled about each of these deviations from his plans, but Rose could tell that deep down, he enjoyed seeing his old friends again.

In between these little digressions, they honeymooned across the stars, checking off over a hundred places in the intergalactic edition of *1000 Places to See Before You Die*. They didn’t stay completely out of trouble, but the adventures were generally fun and easily wrapped up. Whether that was the TARDIS obliging by not taking them to dangerous points in time, or the Doctor arranging it himself, Rose wasn’t completely sure, but either way, she enjoyed it.

When she pushed open the TARDIS doors one morning just over six months after they were married and saw London, 2008 instead of the alien planet she’d been promised, Rose assumed they were meeting someone else.

But the Doctor was examining their surroundings curiously, instead of frowning the way he did when he pretended to be annoyed that the TARDIS had taken them off course. “I wonder why she brought us here.”

“So, I’m guessing there’s no old friend here for me to meet.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think so, no. You notice we landed on a street corner, rather than in someone’s back garden.”

“Well, you know what that means. There’s a reason she brought us here.” Rose held her hand out. “Care to see if we can find trouble, Doctor?”

He took her hand with a grin. “With you, Rose Tyler? Always.”

It didn’t take long to find; trouble was as clear as the lightning flashing around the Royal Hope Hospital. “Hold on,” the Doctor muttered, pulling Rose around to the back of the building. “That static electricity, that’s plasma coils.”

“And what are those?” she asked.

The Doctor pointed to large metal casings placed around the hospital. “They look like compressor units for air conditioning, but those are plasma coils. Usually part of an H2O scoop. Now, judging
by the amount of electricity humming around here, whoever is behind this isn’t quite ready to collect the hospital yet.”

Rose smiled up at him, that hint of tongue sticking out. “Suddenly, my stomach hurts. Shall we get me checked in so you can check it out?”

The Doctor pressed a quick kiss to her lips. *I love you.*

*I know.*

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The nurse at the reception desk handed them a stack of paperwork. Rose filled it out quickly, and when she wrote down her NHS number, the Doctor realised that this was a different kind of infiltration than he was used to. Rose actually had credentials to get into a British hospital.

Rose smirked up at him when she handed him the finished paperwork, having caught that thought.

A nurse came by shortly to do an intake exam, and the Doctor marvelled at how Rose answered all the nurse’s questions just vaguely enough to sound like she might be sick, without raising suspicion when it turned out later that nothing was actually wrong with her.

Rose caught that thought and told him, *Lots of experience, skiving off from school,* and he had to cough to hide his laughter.

It took far longer for her to actually be admitted to the hospital than the Doctor had anticipated. He was unpleasantly reminded of the inefficiency of twenty-first century Earth medicine when a nurse insisted on drawing blood for a pregnancy test—which came back negative, as both Rose and the Doctor had assured her it would.

By the time she was seen by a doctor and actually admitted to the ward, it was nearly supper time. “I’ll go home and get an overnight bag, love,” he told her when a member of the kitchen staff brought her dinner tray in.

*Don’t suppose you could bring real food?* she asked as she poked at the vaguely chicken-like main dish with her fork. He winked in reply, drawing a smile from Rose.

The TARDIS felt empty without his bond mate, and the Doctor was surprised by how much one person could fill such a vast space, especially considering they didn’t spend every waking moment together. But, he supposed, *this is different from a normal day when she might be painting or reading while I tinker in my work room.*

He packed her bag and then, as requested, he stopped in the galley to make a turkey sandwich. Actually, he was fairly certain she was hoping for chips, but he couldn’t imagine he could sneak that into the room without the nurses smelling it.

On the way back to the hospital, he checked on the plasma coils again. The charge had built up significantly in the eight hours since they’d first noticed them; if his calculations were correct, whoever was behind this would be ready to take the hospital around breakfast time.

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The dull turkey sandwich was nearly the highlight of one of the most boring nights of Rose’s life. After finishing her meal, she spent a few hours with the Doctor watching an *EastEnders* marathon. But when visiting hours were over, he pecked her on the cheek and disappeared—not to go home,
she knew, but to investigate. Meanwhile, she had to stay in bed, feigning sleep, whilst he poked around the hospital.

When the Doctor slipped back through the curtain shortly after midnight, she nearly pounced on him in her eagerness to have something new to keep herself occupied. He laughed silently and settled onto the bed beside her.

*So, what did you find?* she asked, thankful the bond gave them a way to talk without raising any suspicions.

*Nothing. The only thing I saw was an older woman wandering by herself in her dressing gown, but that’s not exactly suspicious.*

*So now what?*

*Now, we wait. Those plasma coils were almost ready—whoever is behind this will be making a move soon.*

Rose yawned, finally feeling tired. *Think I’m gonna get some sleep. It sounds like tomorrow will be a busy day.*

The Doctor hummed his agreement and slid off the bed. Rose rolled over onto her side and frowned when he pulled his coat on.

He turned around when he had the collar straightened out. *What?*

*Nothing, just… I’m not used to sleeping alone anymore.*

He leaned down and brushed her hair back over her ear. *I’ve managed to avoid detection so far, but I think the nurses would notice if they found me in bed with you tomorrow morning.*

*Hmmm… you’re probably right.* She yawned again, her jaw cracking this time.

The Doctor’s lips quirked up in a smile, and she could feel the laughter he was holding back. *Get some sleep, love. I’ll bring you breakfast in the morning.*

*Best bond mate ever,* she told him sleepily as he slipped back through the curtain.

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Rose was awake the next morning well before most of the patients. Pale morning sun streamed in through the window, and she blinked against the light as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

As if by magic, the Doctor peeked around the edge of the curtain. *Good, you’re up.* He held up a drink carrier and a bag. *Breakfast as promised, my lady.*

Rose sat up straight in bed and snatched the bag out of his hands. *You are amazing and wonderful,* she told him as she took a bite of the bacon butty.

His eyes twinkled as he handed her her tea. Rose sighed after the first sip. After twenty-four hours without, even the paper takeaway cup couldn’t spoil her enjoyment of her tea.

When they finished their breakfast, he snuck away to toss the evidence in the bin. The nurse came around while he was gone, checking on Rose’s vitals and letting her know a group of medical students would be coming by later on a rotation.
A professor pushed the blue curtain aside, revealing the promised group of medical students, looking eager in their fresh, white lab coats. “Now then, Mrs. Tyler, a very good morning to you. How are you today?”

Rose shrugged. “Eh, still not feeling too great,” she said, wrinkling her nose.

“Rose Tyler, admitted yesterday with severe abdominal pains,” he told the students. Turning to the beautiful woman standing next to him, he said, “Jones, why don’t you see what you can find? Amaze me.”

The student looked at the Doctor as she walked around to the opposite side of the bed. “What were you doing earlier, running around outside?” she asked as she pulled her stethoscope out.

Rose and the Doctor both blinked. “Sorry?” he asked.

“On Chancellor Street this morning?” she said as she put the bell over Rose’s chest. “You came up to me and took your tie off.”

“Really? What did I do that for?”

“I don’t know… You just did.”

He shook his head. “Not me. I was here, with Rose. Ask the nurses.”

She straightened up, forgetting all about Rose. “Well, that’s weird, ‘cause it looked like you,” she told the Doctor. “Have you got a brother?”

“No, not any more. Just me. John Tyler, by the way.”

*Non-linear meeting?* Rose asked, and the Doctor agreed.

Meanwhile, the professor sighed impatiently. “As time passes and I grow ever more infirm and weary, Miss Jones.”

The young woman flushed. “Sorry. Right.” She held the bell to Rose’s chest again and listened. “Fifty-five beats per minute. You’re in excellent shape, Mrs. Tyler.”

Rose looked at the Doctor. “We do a lot of running,” she said with a straight face.

“If you’re done getting a life history of the patient, perhaps you have an idea, Miss Jones?”

The student’s eyes flicked around, then settled on Rose’s ring, obviously still new. “Ah, I don’t know. Could you be pregnant?”

Both Rose and the Doctor shook their heads. “We can’t have children,” the Doctor explained, “not without a lot of jiggery-pokery.”

“And that’s not a euphemism,” Rose interjected, earning laughs from the students and an eye roll from their teacher.

The professor shook his head at the students and walked to the foot of the bed. “And Miss Jones, you rather failed basic techniques by not consulting first with the patient’s chart.” The metal clipboard shocked him when he picked up Rose’s chart.
“That happened to me this morning,” Miss Jones said.

Another of the students agreed. “I had the same thing on the door handle.”

“And me, in the lift,” added a young Indian woman.

“That’s only to be expected,” the professor said dismissively. “There’s a thunderstorm moving in and lightning is a form of static electricity, as was first proven by… Anyone?”

“Benjamin Franklin,” the Doctor said, and Rose groaned silently.

The man looked at him, surprised. “Correct.”

Rose knew what was coming next. “My mate, Ben,” the Doctor said. “That was a day and a half. I got rope burns off that kite, and then I got soaked.”

The professor’s face froze in an impassive expression. “Quite.”

“And then I got electrocuted,” the Doctor added indignantly.

“Moving on,” the professor told his students, and Rose heard him add, “I think perhaps a visit from psychiatric,” as they walked away.

Rose poked her bond mate telepathically, and he looked over at her. What?

Your mate Ben? she asked. You do realise that sounds mental to anyone who doesn’t own a time machine, right?

He ran a hand through his hair. Yes, well…

Rose grabbed his hand. Never mind, she told him. You might be a crazy alien, but you’re my crazy alien.

The Doctor rocked back on his heels and gave her the silly, happy grin she loved so much.

What’s with you taking my name? she asked a moment later. I thought you normally went by John Smith.

I wanted us to have the same last name, and you will always be Rose Tyler.

There was only one possible reply to that. Rose reached for the Doctor’s tie and tugged him down to press her lips against his. The quick kiss she’d intended progressed into a thorough snog when the Doctor put one hand down on the mattress to support his weight and used the other to tilt her head slightly so he could deepen the kiss.

Rose sighed into the kiss, grateful for the curtain that gave them the smallest amount of privacy. But when the Doctor moaned softly in response to her sucking his lower lip into her mouth, she reluctantly eased back, letting his lip go with a soft pop.

He blinked down at her, and Rose smiled and brushed her thumb over his lips. I love you.

I love you too, he said as he sat down in the chair by her bed.

She looked at him, a touch more seriously. Now what do you think is going on with that medical student?
Not a clue, the Doctor said cheerfully. At a guess, for some reason in the future, I need to convince her that time travel is possible, but I have no idea why.

She was pretty clever, seeing my ring and asking if I could be pregnant. Young couple, clearly fresh from their honeymoon, it was a logical question.

If we gloss over the fact that she didn’t consider they already tested you.

Her advisor was pressuring her to provide an answer without enough information, Rose countered. At least she came up with something that might actually cause stomach pain in a woman, instead of just restating the symptoms.

The Doctor leaned back in his chair. You’re thinking she should travel with us?

I’m thinking we should keep an eye on her. And then, depending on what we see…

The racket of heavy rainfall hitting the windows interrupted their conversation, and Rose slipped out of bed to walk to the window with the Doctor. She could hardly make out the next building through the rain streaked windows, and lightning crashed continually all around them.

That’s not regular lightning, is it? Rose asked.

No. Well, yes and no. The storm itself isn’t an atmospheric event, so the lightning isn’t regular in that sense. However, the plasma coils have built up enough static electricity around the hospital for the excess electricity to be discharging, and since as we discussed earlier, lightning is really just static electricity, then yes, it is regular lightning. Only different.

They stood hand in hand watching the storm for a moment, then Rose blinked.

“The rain’s going up,” she said.

The Doctor nodded. “That’s the H2O scoop. Whoever wanted the hospital is ready to take it.” Bright white light flooded the room. “Head’s up, here we go.”

The building started to shake, stronger than the TARDIS on her worst days. Rose lost her balance and grabbed onto the Doctor’s arm to stay upright, then had to plant her feet when he started to tip backward himself.

The shaking lasted for a full thirty seconds. Anything not secured rolled onto the floor or fell over, creating a cacophony of shattering glass and metal clattering against tile.

With a final thud, the building stopped moving. The Doctor and Rose looked through the window into outer space, with the Earth in the distance.

“Doctor, are we…”

The grey, rocky landscape was unmistakable. “We’re on the moon.”

“Never been here before,” Rose quipped. “Someplace new to add to the list.”

Screams of panic echoed through the hallways, and the Doctor glanced out at the patients and doctors stumbling around outside the room.

“When we’re done here, I’ll take you to the moon landing,” he promised. “But I think it’s time for us to do a little exploring, which would probably be easier if you got dressed.”
Rose ducked behind the curtain, and the clever medical student from earlier strode into the room, talking to the panicking patients lingering in the doorway. “All right now, everyone back to bed. We’ve got an emergency but we’ll sort it out. Don’t worry.”

The Doctor stood aside and watched her and her friend as they walked to the window. Rose had suggested they keep an eye on her, and when it came to people, she was usually right.

One of her fellow students, the young Indian woman, was trembling and whimpering in fear, but Miss Jones looked around with wide-eyed amazement. “It’s real. It’s really real. Hold on.”

She reached for the latch on the window, but her friend dashed forward and grabbed her arm. “Don’t! We’ll lose all the air.”

Soon-to-be Dr. Jones examined the window and shook her head. “But they’re not exactly air tight. If the air was going to get sucked out it would have happened straight away, but it didn’t. So how come?”

Rose stepped out from behind the curtain, fully dressed, and gave the Doctor a significant look, but he didn’t need any encouragement.

“Very good point,” he said, putting his hands in his pockets and rocking back on his heels. She turned around and stared at him. “Brilliant, in fact. What was your name?”

“Martha.”

“And it was Jones, wasn’t it?” Rose asked.

Martha nodded, and the Doctor strode across the room. “Well then, Martha Jones, the question is, how are we still breathing?”

“We can’t be,” the other medical student moaned.

Rose patted her on the shoulder, but the Doctor rolled his eyes at her whimpering. “Obviously we are, so don’t waste my time.”

Rude, Rose chided, then took over the conversation.

“We need a way to see outside,” she said. “Is there like, a balcony or something nearby, Martha?”

“By the patients’ lounge, yeah.”

The Doctor took Rose’s hand. “Fancy going out?” he asked Martha.

“Okay.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “We might die,” he said, the words somewhere between a taunt and a dare.

“We might not,” she retorted in the same tone of voice.

Oh, I like her, Rose told the Doctor, and he agreed.

“Good,” he said to Martha. “Come on. Not her,” he added, pointing at her friend. “She’d hold us up.”

Except for a few patients still whimpering on the floor and the nurses trying to calm them, the hall
was almost empty. The patients’ lounge was on the opposite side of the building from the room Rose had been in, furnished with typical hospital waiting room furniture. One side of the room had a bank of windows that usually would look out over the river, and now had a beautiful view of the Earth.

At the balcony doors, Martha hesitated for a moment. “Go on,” Rose encouraged. “When will you have an opportunity like this again?”

Martha smiled, and she and the Doctor opened the doors together. The Doctor engaged his respiratory bypass and braced himself to pull both women back into the hospital if he needed to, but the artificial atmosphere in the hospital extended at least as far as the balcony.

“We’ve got air,” Martha breathed. “How does that work?”

“Just be glad it does,” the Doctor told her as they walked to the edge of the balcony.

The Earth hung against the starry backdrop, and Rose squeezed his hand. *Looking at the Earth like this will always remind me of when you gave me my ring.* The Doctor let go of her hand and wrapped his arm around her waist instead.

“I’ve got a party tonight,” Martha said. “It’s my brother’s twenty-first.” She shook her head quickly and looked like she was choking back tears. “My mother’s going to be really, really…”

The Doctor recognised the shock setting in. “You okay?”

She nodded quickly. “Yeah.”

“Sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Want to go back in?”

She looked at him in defiance. “No way. I mean, we could die any minute, but all the same, it’s beautiful.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Rose agreed.

“How many people want to go to the moon?” Martha held her hands out, palms up, and looked into space. “And here we are.”

The Doctor let go of Rose and leaned against the balustrade. “Standing in the Earthlight.”

“What do you think happened?” Martha asked.

“What do you think?” the Doctor asked, turning the question back to her.

Martha glanced down, then back up at him and Rose, and the Doctor was surprised by the determined look in her eyes. “Extraterrestrial. It’s got to be,” she said firmly, as if she expected him to argue. When he didn’t, she continued. “I don’t know, a few years ago that would have sounded mad, but these days? That spaceship flying into Big Ben, Christmas, those Cybermen things.”

The Doctor and Rose both flinched at the reminder, but they remained silent.

Martha sighed. “I had a cousin. Adeola. She worked at Canary Wharf. She never came home.”

The Doctor remembered her. She’d been one of the three Torchwood employees who’d been
partially cyberised before the invasion began. “I’m sorry,” he said quietly.

Martha nodded, clearly trying to get her emotions under control. “Yeah.”

Rose patted Martha’s arm. “We were there, in the battle,” she said, bracing herself for the memories. To her surprise, the sharpness of the pain had faded.

Martha’s spine straightened. “Mr. Tyler, Mrs. Tyler, I promise you, we will find a way out. If we can travel to the moon, then we can travel back. There’s got to be a way.”

Rose watched the Doctor push off from the balustrade and explore the rest of the balcony. “It’s not Tyler,” he told Martha as he looked down at the ground. “That’s not my real name.”

She looked at him over her shoulder. “Who are you, then?”

“I’m the Doctor.”

Martha let out a half-laugh. “Me too, if I can pass my exams. What is it then, Doctor Tyler?”

“Just the Doctor.”

Confusion furrowed Martha’s brow. “How do you mean, just the Doctor?”

“That’s his name, Martha,” Rose interjected. “The Doctor.”

Martha looked at her sceptically. “And I suppose you’re not actually Rose Tyler.”

Rose smiled at her. “No, that’s me—NHS number and all.”

Martha tossed her hair back over her shoulder. “But people call him the Doctor?” she asked, nodding toward the Doctor.

Rose and the Doctor answered together. “Yes.”

“Well, I’m not.” Martha stepped away from them. “As far as I’m concerned, you’ve got to earn that title.”

The Doctor raised his eyebrows. *Blimey, she’s a tough crowd.*

Rose giggled, and the Doctor grinned at her.

“Well, I’d better make a start, then,” he said to Martha. He bent over and grabbed a pebble off the ground. “Let’s have a look. There must be some sort of—” He tossed the pebble out, and it hit something and bounced right back. “—forcefield keeping the air in.”

Martha looked around, apprehension on her face. “But if that’s like a bubble sealing us in, that means this is the only air we’ve got. What happens when it runs out?”

“Oh, you’re quick!” Rose said.

“How many people in this hospital?” the Doctor asked.

Martha shrugged. “I don’t know. A thousand?”

Suddenly, the view wasn’t quite as beautiful. “One thousand people. Suffocating,” the Doctor said. “Why would anyone do that?” Martha asked in disbelief.
From above, the Doctor heard the sound of thrusters firing as a spaceship landed—three spaceships, in fact, he realised when they came into view.

“Head’s up! Ask them yourself.”

Rose watched as three cylindrical spaceships slowly landed on the surface of the moon. The hatches opened, and tiny figures marched out onto the surface of the moon.


“Judoon.”

The tone of his voice and the set of his jaw told Rose that the Doctor had figured out a large part of why the TARDIS had brought them here. When he nodded slightly instead of saying anything more, she knew he wasn’t ready to explain it yet.

“Let’s go back inside,” he said instead. “I need a place where I can watch them come in, but not be noticed.”

Martha nodded. “There’s a mezzanine level. I’ll take you there.”

They jogged through the hallways and down the stairs with Martha leading the way. When they reached the mezzanine, Rose and the Doctor scanned it for cover, choosing the potted plants at the same time. Martha crouched down with them, though Rose doubted she understood why they were hiding like this.

Below, a large crowd of patients were staring out the door as the aliens marched toward the hospital. Rose had seen this scenario play out often enough to guess at what would happen next. When she spotted one of the medical students who’d been with Martha earlier, she turned to the other woman. “Martha, who’s that? In the front—he was on the rotation with you this morning.”

Martha craned her neck around the broad leaves concealing them. “That’s Morgenstern,” she said.

“And is he clever?” Rose asked, listing off the qualities that might keep the people in the lobby safe. “Quick on his feet? He knows when to obey an order?”

Martha nodded.

“Good. That’s good.”

The patients ran around the room flailing as the Judoon marched through the hospital’s reception area and into the main waiting room. Some of them didn’t even bother trying to leave, but cowered behind chairs instead, staring up in fright.

The Judoon spread out through the room, clearly trying to cover everyone should anyone think of trying to escape. Finally, one took his helmet off, and that only sparked more screaming. Rose didn’t blame them; the bipedal rhinoceros startled her as well, and she was used to aliens of all shapes and sizes.

“Blos so folt do no cro blo cos so ro,” he said, and the Doctor stiffened. When the other Judoon drew their weapons, Rose understood why.

*Doctor, why isn’t the TARDIS translating?* The ship was back on Earth, but with their bond, she should have been able to translate despite the distance.
Rose got the distinct feeling the TARDIS was huffing indignantly, and she knew the Doctor was stifling a laugh. The TARDIS thinks the Judoon’s language is beneath her, he explained. I’ve tried to upload it to the translation circuit, and she refuses it every time.

Morgenstern stepped forward, and Rose had to admire his courage. “Er, we are citizens of planet Earth. We welcome you in peace.”

The Judoon spun around and pushed him against the wall, but when Rose expected him to use that weapon on him, he shone a blue light into his mouth instead.

“Please don’t hurt me,” Morgenstern pleaded. “I was just trying to help. I’m sorry, don’t hurt me. Please don’t hurt me.”

To Rose’s surprise, the Judoon’s device played a recording of Morgenstern’s voice. The alien took the device and plugged it into his armour.

And it doesn’t really matter, the Doctor continued, because…

“Language assimilated,” the Judoon said, in a gravelly voice. “Designation Earth English. You will be catalogued.”

He pulled out another device with a blue light and pointed it at Morgenstern’s forehead. “Category: human,” he said a moment later.

The Doctor had relaxed when he was explaining the TARDIS’ snobbishness to her, but he stiffened again as the Judoon took Morgenstern’s hand and drew an X on it with a black marker.

“Catalogue all suspects,” the Judoon commander ordered, and the rest of the Judoon started cataloguing the doctors and patients in the lobby.

“Oh, look down there,” the Doctor said, “you’ve got a little shop. I like a little shop.”

“Never mind that,” Martha said, dismissing his attempt at deflection. “What are Judoon?”

“They’re like police,” the Doctor explained, then made a face. “Well, police for hire. They’re more like interplanetary thugs.”

“And they brought us to the moon?”

The Doctor nodded. “Neutral territory. According to galactic law, they’ve got no jurisdiction over the Earth, so they isolated it. That rain, lightning? That was them, using an H2O scoop.”

“What are you on about, galactic law?” Martha laughed nervously. “Where’d you get that from?”

They moved around the corner for a better view, and Martha continued questioning the Doctor. “If they’re police, are we under arrest? Are we trespassing on the moon or something?”

“No, but I like that. Good thinking.”

Rose smiled at the similarities between this and her first conversation with the Doctor. Even though she’d been totally wrong in her conclusion about the dummies, he’d been impressed by the logic she’d used.

“No, I wish it were that simple,” he continued. “They’re making a catalogue. That means they’re after something nonhuman, which is very bad news for me.”
“Why?” Martha whispered, watching the Judoon continue to catalogue the patients and hospital staff in the main waiting room.

The Doctor and Rose both looked at her with raised eyebrows. It took Martha a moment to realise they weren’t answering, and she glanced back at them.

“Oh, you’re kidding me,” she said when she got the implication. “Don’t be ridiculous.” Her gaze flitted from the Doctor to Rose and back again. “Stop looking at me like that.”

“Come on then,” the Doctor whispered, leading them away from the mezzanine. They were too exposed here, now that the Judoon had finished the lobby.

What about me, Doctor? Rose asked as they jogged through the hallways toward the admin office. Would they be able to tell I’m not technically human?

He squeezed her hand. No, their scanners aren’t temporally aligned. Frankly, the TARDIS is one of the only places you’d find a temporal scanner, so unless we tell people, they should almost always think you’re human.

Rose slotted that piece of information away. It could be useful to appear to be human. It could be useful today, in fact.

The Doctor gave her a sidelong glance, and Rose met his gaze. If I can help, I’m gonna do it.

He sighed and pushed open the office door. “Martha, can you go check on the Judoons’ progress? That’ll give me some idea as to how much time I’ve got.” She nodded, and the Doctor and Rose entered the office alone.

Rose watched the Doctor sit down in front of the computer and use the sonic on it to scan the database. “What do you think of Martha so far?” she asked.

“Nice. Clever. A bit slow to believe in things she hasn’t already seen proof of.”

“Which would explain what she said about seeing you in the street this morning.”

“Exactly.”

Rose toyed with her TARDIS key. It had been over a year since anyone had travelled with them, and she’d gotten used to having the Doctor to herself. Still, she felt the tug of the timelines, telling her they needed Martha.

“Let’s get through this first,” the Doctor said absently. “When we’re all back on Earth, we can talk about it.”

Martha came back then, ending the conversation. “They’ve reached the third floor.” She eyed the Doctor curiously. “What’s that thing?”

“Sonic screwdriver.”

She huffed out a short laugh and rolled her eyes. “Well, if you’re not going to answer me properly.”

The Doctor stopped what he was doing and looked at her over his shoulder. “No, really, it is. It’s a screwdriver, and it’s sonic. Look,” he said, holding it up.

“You know, Doctor, I’ve never seen you actually use it as a screwdriver,” Rose remarked.
Martha looked at her. “What else has he got, a laser spanner?”

“I did,” the Doctor answered, “but it was stolen by Emily Pankhurst, cheeky woman. Oh, this computer!” He smacked the top of the monitor. “The Judoon must have locked it down. Judoon platoon upon the moon.”

He rubbed at his mouth and jaw. “And we didn’t even mean to go to London,” he said, and Rose leaned back to watch Martha try to keep up with his babbling. “We’ve been travelling, taking an extended honeymoon, and when we ended up in London, we decided to poke around a bit, and then I noticed these plasma coils around the hospital, and that lightning, that’s a plasma coil. Been building up for two days now, so we checked in. We thought something was going on inside. It turns out the plasma coils were the Judoon up above.”

Throughout that explanation, he’d run his hands through his hair over and over, leaving him looking like a hedgehog. *A sexy hedgehog,* Rose told him cheekily when he looked up at her in amusement.

“Any idea what they’re looking for?” Rose asked.

“Something that looks human, but isn’t,” he answered, going back to work on the computer.

Martha raised an eyebrow. “Like you, apparently.”

“But not him,” Rose said, feeling a little protective.

Martha looked back and forth at the two of them. “Haven’t they got a photo?”

The Doctor shrugged, and his eyes moved rapidly from left to right as he read the information flashing across the screen. “Well, it might be a shape-changer.”

“Whatever it is, can’t you just leave the Judoon to find it?” Martha suggested.

The Doctor shook his head. “If they declare the hospital guilty of harbouring a fugitive, they’ll sentence it to execution.”

“All of us?” Martha asked.

“Oh yes. If I can find this thing first—” He pushed back from the desk and smacked the screen. “Oh! You see, they’re thick! Judoon are thick! They are completely thick!”

“Yeah, they’re thick,” Rose said soothingly. “What exactly did they do?”

“They wiped the records. Oh, that’s clever,” he added sarcastically.

“We’ll have to do this the old-fashioned way then,” Rose said. “Any clue as to what we’re looking for?”

“I don’t know,” he moaned, ruffling his hair even further. “Say, any patient admitted in the past week with unusual symptoms. Maybe there’s a back-up,” he muttered, picking the computer up and looking at the bottom.

“Just keep working,” Martha said. “I’ll go ask Mr. Stoker. He might know.”

The Doctor kept working without acknowledging Martha’s departure.

As soon as she left the room, Rose walked around the desk and put her hand on his shoulder. “Tell me what’s really got you so worked up,” she said quietly.
The Doctor took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. It really shouldn’t surprise him that she knew
him so well; she’d always been able to read him, and with their bond, it was almost automatic. Still,
not being able to hide his unease would take some getting used to.

She ran a hand through his hair and he sighed, relaxing for just a moment before he started working
on the computer again.

*This is the first time we’ve been in serious danger since we’ve been bonded,* he explained, choosing
the intimacy of telepathy over verbal communication. He found the back-up and hit restore. *That has
me a little… on edge.*

The system restore started, and he pushed back from the desk. “Let’s go tell Martha we don’t need
Mr. Stoker’s opinion after all,” he said, running out into the corridor with Rose on his heels.

They found Martha in the hallway when she ran straight into them. “I’ve restored the back-up,” the
Doctor told her as he steadied her on her feet.

“I found her,” Martha interrupted, glancing behind her again.

“You did what?”

Two identical figures in motorcycle leathers broke down the office door Martha had just ran through.
The Doctor took one look at them and realised they were Slabs.

“Run!” he ordered, grabbing one of Rose’s hands and one of Martha’s, pulling them along with him.

The Doctor made for the stairwell door at the end of the hallway, letting go of their hands as they
raced down one flight of stairs. When they would have turned to continue going down, they saw
Judoon coming up.

“This way,” he told them, going back out into the hospital. His keen hearing picked up the sound of
one of the Slabs running behind them, and he looked for a way to get rid of him.

His eyes lit on the sign for the radiology department, and a manic grin spread across his face. He
pulled Rose through the doors, trusting that Martha would follow.

The x-ray machine was in a room at the end of the department, and they barely made it there before
the slab caught up to them. The Doctor slammed the door shut and sonicked the lock just in time, but
he knew it would only take the drone slave a moment to get it broken down.

“Rose, Martha, get behind the radiation screen,” he directed. “When I say now, push the button,” he
told Martha.

“But I don’t know which one,” she protested.

“Then find out!”

He didn’t stand around waiting to see if Martha would figure it out; between her and Rose, he had
complete confidence they’d get it.

The x-ray machine was suspended from the ceiling, and the Doctor reached up and pulled it down to
eye level. *Just what I was hoping for,* he thought with a grin when he saw the power supply was
easily accessible. He sonicked the casing open, then changed the setting on the screwdriver and
pressed it into the machine, increasing the voltage of electricity flowing into the vacuum tube by five
thousand percent.
Just in time, too. The slab broke the door down and the Doctor pointed the x-ray machine at it. “Now!” he shouted, and a bright white light flashed through the room. The Doctor felt a tingling sensation as the radiation passed through his body, but the slab got it worse. It only took a moment for him to go down completely.

“What did you do?” Martha asked from the other side of the radiation barrier.

The Doctor stared down at it. “Increased the radiation by five thousand percent. Killed him dead.”

“And let me guess,” Rose drawled, “you can handle it because of your superior biology.”

“Yes!” he said, looking over at the women—one concerned, one amused. “We used to play with Röntgen bricks in the nursery. It’s safe for you to come out. I’ve absorbed it all,” he added, realising he hadn’t given them the all-clear.

The gentle buzz of the radiation in his system started to tingle uncomfortably, and he worked on pushing it down into his left foot. “All I need to do is expel it. If I concentrate, I can shake the radiation out of my body and into one spot.” The radiation reached his foot and he bounced up and down, shaking it into his shoe, snorting as the sensation intensified. “It’s in my left shoe. Here we go, here we go. Easy does it.” The more concentrated the radiation became, the stronger the burning feeling was, and he started hopping toward the bin on one foot, shaking the left foot as he went so it would be expelled faster. “Out, out, out, out, out. Out, out. Ah, ah, ah, ah! Itches, itches, itches, itches! Hold on.”

Finally, it was out of his body. He reached down, yanked off his left shoe, and chucked it in the bin. “Done.”

Rose laughed merrily. “You are an absolute nutter.”

He grinned at her. “You’re right. I look daft with one shoe.” He pulled the other one off and threw it away as well, waggling his eyebrows at her ridiculously. “Barefoot on the moon,” he said and clicked his teeth together.

Martha shook her head and walked over to the slab. “So what is that thing?” she asked, crouching down next to it. “And where’s it from, the planet Zovirax?”

Rose and the Doctor joined her on the other side of the slab. “It’s just a slab,” the Doctor said. “They’re called Slabs. Basic slave drones. See?” He touched the arm and squeezed slightly, and Martha copied him. “Solid leather, all the way through. Someone has got one hell of a fetish.”

Martha started talking, but the Doctor realised then that he hadn’t retrieved his screwdriver from the x-ray machine, and he stood up. To his dismay, amplifying the effects of the machine had completely fried it.

“My sonic screwdriver,” he moaned.

“You can use mine until you make a new one, Doctor,” Rose said, pressing it into his hand. “But right now, Martha was trying to tell us who the slab was working for.”

“Right,” the Doctor said, tossing his screwdriver away and looking back at Martha. “Miss Finnegan, you say?”

“Yes! She was one of the patients, but she had a straw, and she was drinking Mr. Stoker’s blood—like some kind of vampire. Are there alien vampires, Doctor?”
“You called me Doctor,” he said happily. Then he caught up with what she was saying, and his smile disappeared. “Funny time to take a snack. You’d think she’d be hiding.” He paused and stared at the ceiling, trying to work it out. “Unless. No. Yes, that’s it. Wait a minute. Yes!” he shouted. “Shape-changer. Internal shape-changer. She wasn’t drinking blood, she was assimilating it.”

“Assimilating?” Rose asked.

The Doctor nodded. “If she can assimilate Mr. Stoker’s blood, mimic the biology, she’ll register as human. We’ve got to find her and show the Judoon. Come on!”
Rose felt a little like a secret agent as they ran through the corridors, ducking into doorways and slipping carefully around corners. She grinned up at the Doctor when they took cover behind a water dispenser, seeing the same spark of excitement in his eyes that she felt.

They all heard loud footsteps just around the corner. A slab walked by, and the Doctor murmured, “That’s the thing about slabs. They always travel in pairs.”

Martha glanced back at him. “Not like you can talk. I never figured alien investigators would do something as domestic as getting married. What’s that all about then?”

The Doctor’s fingers flexed around Rose’s hand. “Oh, humans. You always think you’re the only ones to do things. Do you really think no other species in the universe takes a life partner?” He stood up and crept around her. “Come on.”

“I like that,” Martha muttered as she stood up. “Humans. I’m still not convinced you’re an alien.”

Rose wasn’t even surprised when the Doctor ran straight into a Judoon at that moment. “Non-human,” the Judoon grunted after he scanned the Doctor.

Martha gaped at them. “Oh my God, you really are.”

The Doctor’s exasperation was off the charts. “And again.”

Rose was two steps ahead of the Doctor and Martha, running away from the Judoon. Hearing laser blasts behind them, they all ducked and then managed to turn the corner before the Judoon fired their weapons a second time.

But the chase was on. Heavy footsteps thudded behind them, and the Doctor sped past Rose and pushed the door to the stairwell open.

*Rose,* he said as they exited the stairs on the next floor up, remember what you said about your human DNA being useful?*

*You need a distraction,* she said, easily picking up on that much of his plan.

*I might. You up for it if I do?*

*Always.*

They passed through a door that led them to the main corridor, and he turned the lock.

“They’ve done this floor,” he explained. “Come on. The Judoon are logical and just a little bit thick. They won’t go back to check a floor they’ve checked already. If we’re lucky.”

All around them, people were beginning to pass out from lack of oxygen. Martha’s friend was giving oxygen to a patient leaning against the wall, and Rose and Martha stopped next to her.

“How much oxygen is there?” Martha asked.
The Doctor noticed they weren’t following and turned around.

“Not enough for all these people,” Martha’s friend said. “We’re going to run out.”

Rose was grateful for the changes to her own biology that enabled her to breathe a little more efficiently, but she looked at Martha in concern. “How are you feeling? Are you all right?”

She grinned. “I’m running on adrenaline.”

The Doctor nodded once as he analysed the oxygen content remaining in the air. Not enough. “Welcome to our world.”

“What about the Judoon?” Martha asked.

He shook his head. “Nah, great big lung reserves. It won’t slow them down. Where’s Mr. Stoker’s office?”

Martha got back to her feet and led the way around the next corner. “It’s this way.”

The door at the end of the short corridor stood half open, and the Doctor stopped Martha with a hand on her shoulder and walked around her. If the plasmavore or the other slab were still there, he could hold them off long enough for Rose and Martha to get away.

He peered through the doorway, and once he was satisfied the office was empty, he jogged into the room.

“She’s gone,” Martha said, following right behind him. “She was here.”

They all bent over Mr. Stoker, who was quite a bit paler than he’d been earlier. “Drained him dry,” the Doctor said. “Every last drop. I was right. She’s a plasmavore.”

“What’s she doing on Earth?”

Rose put the pieces together. “She’s hiding, isn’t she, Doctor? On the run. The Judoon are here for her.”

“Yep,” he said. “Like Ronald Biggs in Rio de Janeiro. What’s she doing now? She’s still not safe.”

He stood up and moved toward the door. “The Judoon could execute us all. Come on.”

“Wait a minute,” Martha said. Rose’s respect for her grew when she bent down to close Mr. Stoker’s eyes. Then they all left the office together.

“Think, think, think,” the Doctor muttered, running his hand through his hair. “If I were a wanted plasmavore surrounded by police, what would I do?”

He looked up quickly and groaned when he caught sight of something. Rose followed his line of vision—the sign pointing to the MRI.

“She’s as clever as me. Almost.”

Rose started to ask him to elaborate, but crashes and screams behind them interrupted that thought. A crowd of panicking people ran down the corridor, slowing the Judoon down.


_Time for the distraction, Rose._ Before she’d fully grasped what he was saying, the Doctor wrapped
one arm around her waist, tipped her head back, and kissed her hard. *I need to leave enough trace DNA to confuse their scanners*, he explained as he traced the seam of her mouth with his tongue.

Rose hummed and leaned in to him, her hands automatically coming up to grab his lapels. *Better do a good job of it then, Doctor.*

She felt his lips curve up in a smile, and then his tongue swept into her mouth. *Oh, I’m always thorough,* he promised her.

“Oi!” Martha exclaimed. “Is this really the time for a snog?”

The Doctor broke the kiss and backed toward the connecting corridor. “Martha, stay with Rose. I need to stop the plasmavore.”

*So kissing me is just a diversion?* Rose teased her Doctor as he ran away.

*Never,* he replied.

Martha grabbed Rose’s shoulder, pulling her out of her conversation with the Doctor. “What do we do now?” she asked.

Rose drew in a deep breath and turned toward the distant sound of heavy boots marching toward them. “We wait for the Judoon. That kiss left enough of the Doctor’s DNA on my skin to confuse their scanners. That’ll give him more time to find Miss Finnegan and stop her.”

The doors at the end of the hallway burst open, bouncing off the walls from the force of the Judoon’s push. “Find the non-human. Execute.”

*Stay safe,* Rose ordered while she stood calmly waiting for the Judoon to reach her.

*I’ll do what I can,* he promised, which didn’t exactly make Rose feel any better.

The Judoon stopped in front of her and pulled out his scanner. Even though she knew what it did, having the blue light flashed in her eyes was still a little disconcerting.


Rose found herself pushed against the wall by a giant space rhino, his arm pressed against her chest and his face only inches from hers. She wrinkled her nose at the smell of his breath—Judoon clearly weren’t accustomed to dental hygiene.

“What are you? What are you?” he demanded, getting right in her face.

She wasn’t given time to answer the question before another Judoon stepped forward with a different kind of scanner. The light was red this time, and she stood still while it passed slowly over her body.

“Confirm human,” the Judoon said after a minute, drawing black Xs on her hand and Martha’s. “Traces of facial contact with non-human. Continue the search.”

Most of the Judoon marched away, but the leader stayed and handed Rose a booklet the TARDIS kindly translated to English for her. *So this language isn’t beneath you?* The ship hummed noncommittally.

“You will need this,” the Judoon said gruffly.
Rose flipped it over and read the back. “What’s it for?”

“Compensation,” he replied, then marched away.

Rose teased the Doctor as he ran toward the MRI department. **So kissing me is just a diversion?**

Despite the circumstances, he grinned. **Never.**

*Stay safe.*

The Doctor cringed. What he had planned wasn’t safe, but it wasn’t necessarily unsafe. **I’ll do what I can,** he promised, walking the line between truth and falsehood. He didn’t fool her at all, which wasn’t really a surprise.

Electric sparks shone through the door to the MRI room, and the Doctor squinted as he pushed it open. As he expected, Miss Finnegan and her slab were inside. She had a mark on her hand that indicated she’d been scanned, and the Doctor groaned. **So much for safe.**

He walked slowly into the room, watching Miss Finnegan tamper with the MRI. Once he was almost to the door, he took a deep breath and put on his best clueless human expression.

“Have you seen them?” he exclaimed, pointing to the door. “There are these things. These great big… space rhino… things. I mean, rhinos, from space!”

Miss Finnegan looked over, then went back to her work. The Doctor blinked—it was the same woman he’d seen wandering the hallways the night before. **Of course, blood banks.**

“And we’re on the moon!” the Doctor continued. “Great big space rhinos, with guns, on the moon. And I only came in for my bunions, look.” He held his right foot up, pointing at the non-existent bunions. “I mean, all fixed now. Perfectly good treatment. The nurses were lovely. I said to my wife, I said I’d recommend this place to anyone, but then we end up on the moon.”

Miss Finnegan had finally left the computer she was working on and was slowly walking toward him, a cold look on her face.

“And—did I mention the rhinos?” the Doctor repeated, pointing to the door again.

“Hold him,” she ordered, and the slab grabbed the Doctor’s arms and held them behind his back.

Miss Finnegan walked over to the MRI chamber, which was humming with excess electricity and flashing lights. “Er, that, that big, er machine… thing. Is it supposed to be making that noise?” he asked, knowing very well it wasn’t.

She waved a hand in dismissal without turning around. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“But isn’t that a magnetic resonance imaging thing? Like a ginormous sort of a magnet?” Miss Finnegan looked at him sharply, and he quickly covered. “I did magnetics GCSE. Well, I failed, but all the same.”

“The magnetic setting now increased to fifty thousand Tesla,” she said gleefully.

That was exactly what the Doctor had figured she’d done. “Ooo, that’s a bit strong—isn’t it?” he asked, trying to sound uncertain.
“It’ll send out a magnetic pulse that’ll fry the brain stems of every living thing within two hundred and fifty thousand miles,” she said as she walked toward him. Then she gestured at the room. “Except for me, safe in this room.”

*Okay, a little bit worse than what I’d expected.* “But… Ah, hold on, hold on, I did geography GCSE. I passed that one.” The Doctor squinted at her. “Doesn’t that distance include the Earth?”

“Only the side facing the moon,” she said matter-of-factly. “The other half will survive. Call it my little gift.”

“I’m sorry, you’ll have to excuse me, I’m a little out of my depth. I’ve spent the past fifteen years working as a postman.” He swallowed and looked up at the ceiling. “Hence the bunions. Why would you do that?”

“With everyone dead, the Judoon ships will be mine, to make my escape.” She widened her eyes and smiled with false innocence.

Playing his part of clueless human to the hilt, the Doctor added a note of incredulity to his voice. “No, that’s weird. You’re talking like you’re some sort of an alien.” He laughed at the last word. “Quite so,” she said seriously.

The Doctor’s eyes widened. “No!” he breathed. “Oh, yes.” She smirked at his disbelief.

“You’re joshing me,” the Doctor said, playing for time. “I am not.”

“I’m talking to an alien? In hospital? What, has the place got an ET department?” he asked, unable to resist the joke.

“It’s the perfect hiding place,” she said, gesturing around her. The Doctor watched as she flitted about the room, describing her calculated choice to hide in hospital. “Blood banks downstairs for a midnight feast, and all this equipment ready to arm myself with should the police come looking.”

“So, those rhinos, they’re looking for you?” the Doctor asked, as if he’d just figured it out.

“Yes. But I’m hidden,” she whispered, holding up her hand.

“Right,” he said slowly. He quickly went over the facts. The slab was holding him too tightly for him to squirm away from it. Miss Finnegan had turned the MRI machine up so high that a single pulse would kill half of the inhabitants of the Earth below—not to mention everyone in the hospital, including Rose. And she’d hidden herself well enough that the Judoon would never suspect her… unless he could change that.

He waited until Miss Finnegan walked away to set the trap. “Maybe that’s why they’re increasing their scans.”

She spun back around. “They’re doing what?”

The Doctor nodded slowly, taking a deep breath. *Sorry, love—safe wasn’t an option.* He knew Rose would understand what he’d done right away, and he trusted her to rescue him… or stay with him, on the slim chance that his plan caused him to regenerate.
“Big chief rhino boy, he said, ‘No sign of a non-human, we must increase our scans up to setting two?’” He raised his voice in question at the end and looked up at the ceiling, as if he didn’t understand what the Judoon had said.

The plasmavore’s gaze darted around the room. She finally looked unsettled, which was exactly what the Doctor wanted. “Then I must assimilate again.”

Even though this was what he’d expected and indeed, what he’d planned for, the thought of what was coming still made the Doctor shudder.

“What does that mean?”

She walked back into the control room. “I must appear to be human.”

“Well, you’re welcome to come home and meet the wife,” the Doctor called after her. “She’d be honoured. We can have cake.”

“Why should I have cake?” She reached into her purse. “I’ve got my little straw.”

She sauntered toward him and held the straw out for his inspection. The Doctor couldn’t help the recoil, but by this point, he figured that even the most clueless of humans would probably be cottoning on anyway.

“Oh, that’s nice,” he stammered. “Milkshake? I like banana.”

“You’re quite the funny man. It’s almost too bad that I need to kill you, but after all, you would have been dead anyway.” She looked at the slab. “Steady him!”

The Doctor was pushed to his knees, and the slab grabbed his head and tilted it so Miss Finnegan would have a clear shot at his throat.

“What are you doing?” he asked, the nervousness not faked.

She ran a hand over his neck, searching for a vein. “I’m afraid this is going to hurt,” she said. “But if it’s any consolation, the dead don’t tend to remember.”

The Doctor watched out of the corner of his eye as she stabbed him with the straw. That wasn’t comfortable, but the odd suction when she began to drink his blood was worse.

Rose was almost there, and if the Judoon weren’t moving in this direction, she’d lead them here. Somehow, she’d get them to scan Miss Finnegan again, and hopefully keep him from dying. He didn’t really want to regenerate. That was his last thought before he lost consciousness.

oOoOoOoOo

Rose shook her head and tossed the pamphlet in the nearest bin. With the Judoon safely distracted for the moment, she could return her attention to the Doctor.

“Come on, Martha, he went this way,” she said, jogging in the direction the Doctor had gone.

Sorry, love—safe wasn’t an option.

Rose skidded to a halt when she got the Doctor’s message. After she processed what he was saying, she took off running again, faster this time. It had only taken her a second to realise what he must have done. He was letting Miss Finnegan take his blood so she would scan as an alien again.
“Rose! What are we doing?” Martha asked, panting for breath in the thin air.

“We’re going to save my husband’s life. That daft idiot.”

The Judoon reached the MRI room just ahead of them. Through a gap in the crowd, Rose spotted Miss Finnegan tucking her straw away in her purse, and the Doctor lying on the ground.

“Now see what you’ve done,” Miss Finnegan said, pointing to his body. “This poor man just died of fright.”

“Scan him,” the Judoon ordered. “Confirmation. Deceased,” he said a moment later.

“Oh no he’s not,” Rose muttered. If he were dead, he’d be regenerating. And besides, she could feel him in her mind still. She pushed forward to start CPR. “Martha, she assimilated his blood. Tell them.”

“What?”

Rose switched to his left heart. “Remember what the Doctor said about why she was drinking blood.”

“Oh!” The medical student turned to the Judoon. “She’s the one you’re looking for, not him,” she insisted. “She’s not human.”

“Oh, but I’ve been catalogued,” Miss Finnegan said smugly, holding her hand up.

“Oh really?” challenged Martha, and Rose heard the distinctive sound of a Judoon scanner again.

“Oh, I don’t mind. Scan all you like,” Miss Finnegan said blithely.

Rose really wanted to strangle her, and not because she’d tried to kill her bond mate. *Well, not just because of that.*

_A little bloodthirsty, Rose?*_

*Poor choice of words, Doctor,* Rose said, feeling a surge of happiness that he was aware enough to communicate, even if he wasn’t yet fully conscious.

“Non-human,” the Judoon leader said.

“But, what?” Miss Finnegan said, and Rose smirked at the shock in her voice.

“Confirm analysis.” Rose heard several Judoon reach for their scanners, and she knew what was happening now—they were doing a full scan on her, and would be able to tell she was a plasmavore.

After three rounds of CPR, the Doctor finally heaved a breath, coughing a little as he sucked in air.

“Oh, but it’s a mistake, surely,” Miss Finnegan said, panic building in her voice. “I’m human. I’m as human as they come.”

The Doctor groaned and sat up, still coughing hard. “I’m afraid that gig is up.”

“Confirm,” the Judoon leader said. “Plasmavore, charged with the crime of murdering the child princess of Patrival Regency Nine.”

Rose supported the Doctor and they watched the plasmavore erupt into anger.
“Well, she deserved it!” she spat out. “Those pink cheeks and those blonde curls and that simpering voice,” she said, switching to a squeaking tone for those last words. “She was begging for the bite of a plasmavore.”

“Then you confess?” the Judoon asked.

“Confess? I’m proud of it!” She stepped behind her slab, back into the MRI control room. “Slab, stop them!”

“Doctor, what’s she doing?” Rose asked in a low voice as the Judoon destroyed the slab.

“Something very much not good,” he replied. “Help me stand up, Rose.”

While the Judoon handed down the verdict and sentence on the plasmavore, Rose stood up slowly with the Doctor’s arm draped around her shoulder. They wobbled for a second, then Martha came up to support his other side.

They got him steady just as the Magnetic Overload sign turned on. Miss Finnegan sneered at them all through the window of the control room. “Enjoy your victory, Judoon, because you’re going to burn with me. Burn in hell!”

The last word turned into a scream as all four Judoon fired their weapons into the control room, and the plasmavore disintegrated into nothing, leaving a hole in the glass. “Case closed,” the leader said.

The Doctor stumbled forward, supported by both women. “Right. This is not good. This is very much not good,” he repeated as he examined the controls to the MRI machine.

“What did she mean, burn with me?” Martha asked. “The scanner shouldn’t be doing that. She’s done something.”

The Judoon scanned the machine. “Scans detect lethal acceleration of monomagnetic pulse.”

“Yes, yes, she rigged the whole unit to send out a magnetic pulse strong enough to fry half the Earth,” the Doctor said impatiently. “Now if you’d be quiet, I’m trying to work.”

“All units withdraw.” The Judoon marched out of the room, leaving the two Time Lords and a human behind.

Martha leaned closer to the Doctor. “You can stop it, can’t you Doctor?”

“Oh, yes!” He looked down at the machine and pulled Rose’s borrowed sonic out of his pocket. But the blood loss had left him a little fuzzy, and after he blinked a few times, trying to remember what setting to use to stop the pulse, he put the sonic in his mouth and got down on the floor.

“Sod it,” he mumbled around the metal cylinder. He reached under the desk for the cables and yanked them apart. The scanner turned off.

“You did it,” Martha said, and he noticed she was finally starting to sound out of breath.

“Come on, let’s go back to the lounge,” he said, pushing himself back to his feet. Rose slipped her arm around his waist, and he leaned against her gratefully. “We can watch the Judoon send us back to Earth.”

The corridor was lined with people passed out from hypoxia. For once, the Doctor could sympathise with the feeling of being out of breath; he was still coughing now and then as they stumbled down
the corridor. In fact, Rose was the only one who didn’t appear to be suffering ill effects, but then she
wasn’t fully human, and she hadn’t needed CPR.

They pressed themselves up against the window of the lounge, watching the thrusters fire on the
Judoon ships. The ships lifted off from the surface of the moon, and the Doctor pressed a hand to the
window.

“Come on, Judoon, reverse it,” he muttered.

A second later, raindrops started splattering on the windows, a sign that the H2O scoop had been
reversed and the hospital was being returned to Earth.

“It’s raining,” he said. “It’s raining on the moon.”

The crack of the plasma coils resonated through the hospital, and then a flash of lightning covered
the building. The next moment, they were looking back out at London.

Air slowly sifted into the hospital, enough to revive the people who’d just passed out. Martha drew a
depth breath, then turned and walked back into the corridor. She looked back at them from the
doorway. “I’ve got to help.”

The Doctor raised an eyebrow and held out his hand to Rose. *Let’s leave the clean-up to the
humans,* he suggested.

She agreed, and after a quick detour to her room to pick up her bag, they exited the hospital through
the back door. The plasma coils were gone, leaving behind no sign at all that the hospital had ever
encountered aliens.

The Doctor felt a prickle on the back of his neck as they crossed the street to the TARDIS, and when
he looked over his shoulder, Martha was watching them. He jiggled Rose’s hand, and they both
smiled at their new friend before crossing the busy street and slipping inside their home.

They worked on automatic to take the ship into the Vortex, then Rose grabbed his hand and pulled
him into the med bay.

“I’ll be fine,” he insisted.

Rose crossed her arms and looked at him. “You passed out,” she said flatly. “Your hearts weren’t
beating. The Judoon scanners thought you were dead. How much of your blood did she drink?”

He tugged on his ear. “Ah… two, maybe three pints?”

Her lips thinned. “Sit,” she ordered, pointing to the bed. He obeyed, and she nodded, somewhat
appeased. “Now, tell me what supplies you need to start a transfusion.”

He leaned back against the pillows and directed her quietly, taken aback by the fierce protectiveness
he’d picked up on from the moment he’d regained awareness. It was a side of her he didn’t often
have a chance to observe in action, since she was usually the one in danger. Looking at her now,
though, he remembered that she had once been so determined to save his life that she had absorbed
the entire Time Vortex to keep him safe.

He shivered and pushed the memory aside. “Is this what it feels like?” he asked as he hooked the
transfusion up to his arm.

“What what feels like?” she asked absently, fiddling with the IV hook.
Knowing everything was arranged properly, the Doctor took her hand in his. “Is this what it feels like when something’s happened to you and I’m trying so hard to not be afraid?” he asked softly.

The hand he wasn’t holding clenched into a fist, and the fear she’d kept locked away flooded over both of them. “The Judoon thought you were dead,” she repeated in a raspy voice.

The Doctor dropped her hand and reached for her chin, tipping her head back so he could look her in the eye. “But you knew I wasn’t,” he pointed out evenly. “You knew what I’d done, and you brought me back to consciousness in time to turn off her magnetic weapon and save the hospital.”

She curled her fingers around his tie. “Was that really the only way?” she asked.

He patted the open space on his other side, indicating he wanted her to sit on the bed with him. She walked around to the other side of the bed and cuddled into his side.

“Possibly not the only way,” he admitted once she was settled, “but it was the one most likely to work.”

Rose finally sighed and relaxed against him. They waited for the transfusion to finish, then he took care of unhooking things himself and cleaning up the med bay.

“Time for a kip?” he suggested, holding out his hand. Rose looked worn out, and though he didn’t want to admit it, he was a little drained too.

Ah! I knew you weren’t feeling as well as you pretended you were, Rose said as they walked to their room.

I’m not feeling as poorly as you were afraid I was either, the Doctor pointed out. But it’s been a long, taxing day, and I just want to sleep for a bit.

Rose felt much better after a nap. Whether that was down to the rest or the Doctor’s soothing presence in her mind, she didn’t know, but she was humming to herself as they prepared dinner.

“What did you think of Martha?” she asked once they were sitting down.

“Clever. Quick on her feet. Good to have around in a crisis.” He raised an eyebrow. “Do you want to ask her to come with us?”

Rose considered; she still couldn’t decide if she wanted another person on the TARDIS, long-term. “Maybe not permanently, not at first at least, but she was brilliant. A thank you trip?” she suggested.

The Doctor leaned back in his chair. “Right. One trip, backward or forward, just to say thank you for… well, helping save the lives of 1000 people.”

By the time they finished eating, the TARDIS had tracked Martha’s location and created a replacement screwdriver for the Doctor. He flipped it in the air twice before putting it in his coat pocket, then held the door for Rose as they walked out of the TARDIS into a narrow London alley.

“Martha and her family are having dinner at a restaurant just around the corner,” he said. “We can just slip in, get a table, make eye contact, and wait for her to come talk to us.”

It was a good plan, as far as the Doctor’s plans went, but it was derailed before they even set foot
inside the restaurant. As they turned onto the street, a willowy blonde in a short dress, high heels, and a fake tan stomped through the door away from an older black man.

“I am not staying in there to be insulted!” she said.

The man looked at her beseechingly. “She didn’t mean it, sweetheart. She was just saying you look healthy.”

“No, I did not,” retorted a smartly dressed woman who had followed them out of the restaurant. “I said orange.”

*Let’s let this boil over before we try to go inside*, the Doctor said, and Rose agreed 100%.

One by one, other members of the family drama poured out onto the sidewalk, and Rose was only slightly surprised when Martha joined them.

The longer the argument went on, the more uncomfortable Martha looked. As an only child of a single parent, Rose couldn’t fathom what this kind of altercation was like. She and her mum had rowed, yeah, but it was always just the two of them having it out, not this mess of people talking over each other and taking sides.

Finally, the Jones family stormed off, one at a time or in pairs, leaving Martha all alone outside the restaurant. Rose saw her heave a sigh, and then they caught her eye.

Martha tilted her head in question, and Rose smiled at her. She and the Doctor strolled around the corner, keeping eye contact to indicate they wanted her to follow.

They were leaning against the TARDIS when Martha appeared at the end of the alley. “I went to the moon today,” she said.

“A bit more peaceful than down here,” the Doctor said.

Rose rolled her eyes. “Sorry about that, Martha. The Doctor makes a habit of being accidentally rude.”

Martha shook her head, dismissing her concern. “You never even told me who you are.”

“Yes, we did,” the Doctor countered. “The Doctor and Rose Tyler.”

Martha walked toward them slowly. “What sort of species?” She tilted her head. “It’s not every day I get to ask that.”

Rose felt him stiffen, but knew Martha wouldn’t notice. “I’m a Time Lord,” he said.

“Right! Not pompous at all, then.” She looked at Rose. “But your wife is human.”

Rose smiled at Martha and shook her head. “Not exactly,” she said.

Martha crossed her arms over her chest. “Those Judoon things though, they said you were human.”

“As far as most people can tell, I am, and I have a feeling today won’t be the last time that comes in handy. But... well, it’s complicated and I’d rather not get into it right now, but long story short, I’m more like the Doctor than I am human.”

Martha looked back and forth between them, and Rose could see the questions on her face.
Before she could ask any of them, the Doctor pulled his new sonic out of his pocket and flipped it a few times. “We just thought, since you were brilliant today and I’ve got a brand new sonic screwdriver which needs road testing, you might fancy a trip.”

“What, into space?” she asked incredulously.

“Well.” He shrugged.

“But I can’t,” Martha said, even though they could both tell how much she wanted to say yes. “I’ve got exams. I’ve got things to do. I have to go into town first thing and pay the rent, I’ve got my family going mad—”

“He always forgets to mention the best part, Martha,” Rose said, bumping her shoulder against his arm. “We can travel in time, too.”

Martha snorted. “Get out of here.”

The final piece of the puzzle slipped into place. “I can,” the Doctor insisted.

“Come on now—that’s going too far.”

“I’ll prove it.” He pivoted and pushed the door open. *I’ll be right back, Rose,* he promised, just before the TARDIS dematerialised.

Rose laughed at the look on Martha’s face as the ship disappeared. “It really does travel in time,” she said, just before the TARDIS reappeared.

A moment later, the Doctor stepped back out, holding his tie in his hand. “Told you,” he said smugly, and draped the tie over his head.

“No, but, that was this morning,” Martha protested while the Doctor tightened the tie back up around his neck. “Did you? Oh, my God. You can travel in time. But hold on. If you could see me this morning, why didn’t you tell me not to go into work?”

“Crossing into established events is strictly forbidden,” he said severely, then smiled with a twinkle in his eye. “Except for cheap tricks.”

“And that’s your spaceship?” Martha asked, moving forward slowly and putting her hand on the blue box.

“It’s called the TARDIS,” Rose told her. “Time and Relative Dimension in Space.”

“Your spaceship’s made of wood,” Martha said dryly. She peered around the edge of the TARDIS, and Rose knew what was coming next. “And I’d fit in there, along with both of you?”

The Doctor pushed the door open. “Take a look.”

Martha took two steps inside the console room and the Doctor followed her. “No, no, no.”

Rose leaned against the building, watching in growing amusement as the clever medical student’s understanding of science was turned on its head.

She circled the box, mumbling, “But it’s just a box. But it’s huge.”

Rose laughed; she couldn’t help it. Between Martha’s shock and the Doctor’s growing impatience, this was the best entertainment she’d had in weeks.
Martha didn’t notice though. She looked back inside, and Rose could imagine her wide eyes. “How does it do that? It’s wood,” she exclaimed, knocking on the outside. “It’s like a box with that room just rammed in. It’s bigger on the inside.”

“Is it? I hadn’t noticed,” the Doctor said sarcastically.

Rose raised an eyebrow at him, and he shrugged and waited for her to join them inside before closing the door. Her coat was tossed on top his over the strut, and she joined him at the console.

The Doctor grinned at her. “Right then, let’s get going.”

He’d already set the coordinates, and Rose peeked at them as she took her usual spot. Elizabethan England. It had been a while since they’d visited Earth’s history.

“Wait a minute,” Martha asked. “Is it just the two of you?” She peered down the corridor, and Rose could tell what she was thinking—it was an awfully big space for just two people.

“Yep!” she confirmed. “Just us. Well, sometimes we take a friend along for a trip or two—like we’re doing with you.”

Martha looked around the console room, her gaze never landing on one spot for long. “So this is your life? Travelling through time and space together?”

“What’s wrong with that?” the Doctor asked.

“Nothing!”

He sniffed. “Good.” Rose caught his eye and smiled at him, and his good mood came back. “Well, then. Close down the gravitic anomaliser, fire up the helmic regulator,” he said, and Rose followed the standard dematerialisation procedure. “And finally, the hand brake.”

He spun around the console and put his hand on the lever that would send them into the Vortex. “Ready?” he asked Martha.

“No,” she said, and Rose laughed at her honesty.

“Off we go.” The Doctor threw the dematerialisation lever, and the TARDIS left the dingy London alleyway for the distant past. She shuddered and rocked as they entered the Vortex, and Rose and the Doctor laughed joyfully.

Martha looked at them with wide eyes as they all held on tight to the console. “Blimey, it’s a bit bumpy.”

“Welcome aboard, Miss Jones,” the Doctor said, holding out his hand.

She grinned and shook it. “It’s my pleasure, Mr. and Mrs. Tyler.”

Chapter End Notes

And now Martha is on board! With no jealousy or mixed messages.
Long, delicate fingers combed through the Master’s blond hair. He was in his favourite high-backed arm chair with Lucy draped over his lap while they listened to the radio reports of the disappearance and reappearance of Royal Hope Hospital.

“Eyewitness reports from the Royal Hope Hospital continue to pour in, and it all seems to be remarkably consistent. This from medical student Oliver Morgenstern.”

“I was there. I saw it happen. And I feel uniquely privileged. I looked out at the surface of the moon. I saw the Earth, suspended in space. And it all just proves Mr. Saxon right. We’re not alone in the universe. There’s life out there. Wild and extraordinary life.”

The Master paused the streaming radio on his laptop.

“Isn’t it wonderful timing, Harry?” Lucy asked complaisantly. “Of course, you always would have won the election, but to have such proof of extraterrestrial life only days before…”

He ran a hand up and down her leg, then pushed her off his lap. “Go to bed, Lucy,” he ordered. “I’ll be up shortly, but first I need to take care of some business.”

His wife left, but not without a few lingering looks. The Master made a mental note to pay attention to her attitude over the next year. If she became too clingy or difficult to manage, she could easily be removed.

So, the Doctor and Rose had met Martha Jones. It was time to put his next piece into play.

He picked up his phone and dialled a familiar number. “Lady Thaw?” he said when the woman picked up. “Harold Saxon here. I wondered if Miss Jones had given you a final guest list for tomorrow’s gala event.”

When Lady Thaw told him that no, she didn’t expect the list until the morning, his politician’s smile spread across his face. “Then I wonder if it would be possible to have you add two more names to the list when you see it—as a personal favour to me. An old school friend of mine will be in town tomorrow with his wife, and I know they’d be fascinated with Professor Lazarus’ work.”

Lady Thaw was always willing to oblige Mr. Saxon in anything he wished, of course. “Excellent. Their names are the Doctor and Rose Tyler. No, not Doctor Tyler. His wife is Rose Tyler, but he is just the Doctor.” The Master’s smile turned sharklike. “It’s an old nickname that’s stuck, I’m afraid. You should hear what he calls me.”
A quick word on time. According to the show, S3 takes place in 2007. (There’s the implicit reference of Martha not having read Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, and the explicit reference in “Human Nature.) But according to people with calendars who can actually count, it has to be 2008. Simply put, at some point between “Aliens in London” and the end of S2, they forgot that in the show’s internal timeline, they'd skipped a full year. I’m fixing that.

Rose grinned at Martha, then grunted when the TARDIS’ bumpy flight nearly knocked her to the grating. She frowned at the console and adjusted the temporal telemetry, and their flight smoothed out.

“But how do you travel in time?” she asked. “What makes it go?”

The Doctor sighed. “Oh, let’s take the fun and mystery out of everything. Martha, you don’t want to know. It just does. Hold on tight.”

Rose looked up in time to see Martha make a face at the Doctor’s back as he started the landing sequence, and she bit back a laugh before bracing herself for the landing. Martha, who’d been lulled into a false sense of security by the smoother flight, tumbled to the floor.

“Blimey,” she said as she dusted herself off. “I think I prefer your wife’s flying to yours, Doctor.”

The Doctor reached for the handle and looked at them expectantly. “Outside this door—brave new world.”

“Where are we?” Martha asked, sounding half excited, half scared.

The Doctor pushed the door open and leaned back against the railing. “Take a look.”

Martha moved hesitantly down the ramp and out the door, then froze when she saw their surroundings. Rose slid outside behind her, and even she was impressed. It was Elizabethan
England, just like she’d picked up from the coordinates, but it was one thing to know intellectually where they were going, and another to see the Tudor buildings with their overhanging eaves and children running around in period—no, it wasn’t period dress, it was contemporary clothing. Contemporary to the turn of the 17th century.

“Oh, you are kidding me,” Martha breathed. “You are so kidding me. Oh, my God, we did it. We travelled in time. Where are we?” She held her hand up before the Doctor could correct her. “No, sorry. Gotta get used to this, whole new language. When are we?”

Rose heard a creak above their heads and looked up to see a man leaning out of his window with a bucket in hand. Her mind clicked through everything she knew about the period, and she stepped around to the side of the TARDIS while the Doctor grabbed Martha’s arm and pulled her back against the doors.

“Mind out,” he said.

The contents of a slop bucket dropped right where they’d been standing. “Gardez l’eau!” the man said, a bit late.

“Somewhere before the invention of the toilet,” the Doctor said in answer to Martha’s question. Rose came back to his side now that it was safe and took his hand. “Sorry about that.”

Martha shook her head. “I’ve seen worse. I’ve worked the late night shift A&E.” Rose and the Doctor started to walk down the street, but Martha stopped them with a hurried question. “But are we safe? I mean, can we move around and stuff?”

Rose wrinkled her brow. “Well yeah, why couldn’t we?”

“It’s like in the films.” She looked at them apprehensively. “You step on a butterfly, you change the future of the human race.”

Martha was so earnest and new to time travel, and Rose tried to remember what she’d been like on her first few trips. She’d figured out ages ago that the Doctor liked to travel with humans because they made things new for him. She hadn’t expected to feel the same.

But right now, the Doctor’s weariness over having everything compared to films and books made Rose giggle. Martha looked at her, confused, and she pointed to the Doctor.

“Tell you what then, don’t step on any butterflies,” he suggested. He looked her up and down through narrowed eyes. “What have butterflies ever done to you?”

They started walking down the street, but Martha still wasn’t done asking questions. “What if, I don’t know, what if I kill my grandfather?”

The Doctor turned and walked backwards. “Are you planning to?”

“No.”

He turned back around and they continued walking. “Well, then.”

“And this is London?”

“I think so.” The Doctor looked around at the buildings and caught a scent of the era. “Round about… oh, 1599.”
“Oh, but hold on,” Martha said, and he wondered what objection she’d thought up now. “Am I all right? I’m not going to get carted off as a slave, am I?”

That question completely threw him. “Why would they do that?”

Martha tilted her head down and narrowed her eyes. “Not exactly white, in case you haven’t noticed,” she said, pointing at her face.

“I’m not even human. Just walk about like you own the place. Works for me.” Rose huffed out a breath, and the Doctor looked down at her. “What?”

“It works for you because you’re a white male,” she said patiently, and the two women shared a commiserating look.

He tugged on his ear, thoroughly baffled now. “What?”

“It’s just different for us, that’s all,” Rose said.

The Doctor’s gaze shifted from Rose’s patient smile to Martha’s crossed arms and tapping toes, and he finally understood Martha’s question. “Oh. OH! I forgot that history books in your time still spread that ridiculous nonsense about medieval and Renaissance Europe being an all-white society.” He grinned sheepishly. “Honestly, Martha, there were plenty of free black people in Elizabethan England. At the worst, you might encounter the same unfortunate attitudes that still persist in your time—which is certainly unpleasant,” he added hurriedly, “but they won’t assume you should be a slave.”

Rose nodded, then smiled at Martha. “So you see, no matter where you go in time, people aren’t that different from what we’re used to.”

“That’s right,” the Doctor said, eager to move the conversation forward. “Elizabethan England, not so different from your time. Look over there.” He pointed to a man behind them, shovelling horse manure into a bucket. “They’ve got recycling.” Up ahead, two men were talking beside a water bucket. “Water cooler moment.”

Up ahead, a street preacher tried to catch their attention with emphatic gestures. “And the world will be consumed by flame,” he exhorted.

“Really, seriously, some things never change,” Rose drawled, drawing a laugh from Martha and the Doctor.

“Oh, yes, and entertainment.” The Doctor spun around, getting his bearings. “Popular entertainment for the masses. If I’m right, we’re just down the river by Southwark, right next to…”

He grabbed Rose’s hand and ran down the street, hearing Martha’s footsteps behind them. Just beyond Southwark Cathedral, he turned a corner and there it was.

“Oh, yes!” The Doctor stared in delight at the gleaming white building. “The Globe Theatre! Brand new, just opened. Though, strictly speaking, it’s not a globe, it’s a tetradecagon. Fourteen sides. Containing… the man himself.” He rocked back and forth, grinning at Martha.

“Whoa, you don’t mean—” Martha looked at the theatre, then back at him. “Is Shakespeare in there?”

Rose laughed. “Sometimes I think half the reason the Doctor travels is to meet all his heroes.” She bumped her shoulder against the Doctor’s, considering what her first Doctor had taught her about
Shakespeare in his crash course in English literature. “Too bad you can’t get an autographed first edition like you did when we met Dickens,” she said. “Considering the First Folio wasn’t published until after he died, no one would believe you.”

The Doctor heaved a fake aggrieved sigh. “Do you want to stand here teasing me all night, or do you want to go to the theatre?”

Rose pursed her lips and tapped her chin. “It’s a tough choice, but…” She squeezed his hand. “I’ll go anywhere with you.”

The Doctor wondered how long it would be before statements like that from Rose wouldn’t make his breath hitch. Catching his thoughts, Rose’s eyes softened, and he had to force himself to look over at their friend.

“And you, Martha? Interested in taking in a little culture?”

Martha clasped her hands in front of her, her eyes glowing with excitement. “Oh, yes,” she said, and they started walking again.

“When you get home, you can tell everyone you’ve seen Shakespeare,” the Doctor suggested.

Martha snorted quietly. “Then I could get sectioned.”

“Martha Jones, I like you,” Rose declared through her laughter.

The Doctor sighed and led them to the gate, where he paid the three pennies required for them to sit in the pit.

*You don’t have modern currency, but you carry Elizabethan coinage in your pocket?* Rose asked.

*The contents of my pockets are often a surprise, even to me.*

They weaved their way around people, and the smell of unwashed bodies wafted up to their noses. The play had already begun when they found a spot relatively close to the stage, and the three time travellers watched in rapt amazement as the King of Navarre and his court attempted to avoid all romantic entanglements.

*I could have told him that wouldn’t work,* the Doctor told Rose.

She shook her head and chuckled. *You could now, but admit it, Doctor. Two years ago you were just as determined—and not even so you could dedicate yourself to studying.*

*Yes, and that’s exactly why I could have told him it wouldn’t work.*

The Doctor found the conclusion of the play just as oddly abrupt as he had every other time he’d seen it, but the audience burst into applause as soon as the final words were spoken. He looked down at Martha, whose eyes were wide with amazement.

“That’s amazing! Just amazing.” She waved her hand under her nose. “It’s worth putting up with the smell. And those are men dressed as women, yeah?” she asked, looking at the actors costumed in women’s finery.

The Doctor nodded. “London never changes.”

“Where’s Shakespeare? I wanna see Shakespeare.” Martha craned her neck to see around the people in front of her, then raised her hand and started shouting, “Author! Author!”
The Doctor’s eyes widened, and she looked up at him. “Do people shout that? Do they shout, ‘author?’”

“Author! Author!” Rose took up the cry next, and the crowd joined in.

The Doctor glanced around the crowded theatre, filled with people calling for Shakespeare to come out. “Well, they do now.”

Their cries were answered when a man of medium build leapt through the stage doors, entertaining the audience with a high kick. He waved at the cheering crowd, blowing kisses at his adoring public.

“He’s a bit different from his portraits,” Martha noted.

“Yeah, not quite as bald,” Rose agreed.

The Doctor could hardly contain his excitement. He’d just seen a play at the Globe Theatre, and now he was going to hear Shakespeare speak. “Genius. He’s a genius. The genius. The most human human there’s ever been. Now we’re going to hear him speak. Always he chooses the best words. New, beautiful, brilliant words.”

“Ah, shut your big fat mouths!” Shakespeare said.

The crowd laughed, but the Doctor’s shoulders slumped. “Oh, well.”

Martha leaned in. “You should never meet your heroes.”

Rose patted his arm in consolation. At least Charlie lived up to your great expectations of him.

He cracked a grin. Excellent punning, Rose.

She shot him her trademark smile. Guess you’re rubbing off on me.

On stage, Shakespeare was still talking. “You’ve got excellent taste, I’ll give you that.” He pointed at one of the groundlings. “Oh, that’s a wig.”

The people laughed again, and the Doctor remembered what he had forgotten: Elizabethan humour was typically bawdy and rude.

“I know what you’re all saying,” Shakespeare said. “Love’s Labour’s Lost, that’s a funny ending, isn’t it? It just stops.” He held up his hand and clenched a fist. “Will the boys get the girls? Well, don’t get your hose in a tangle, you’ll find out soon.” As one, the audience begged for the sequel, and Shakespeare shook his head. “Yeah, yeah. All in good time. You don’t rush a genius.” He bowed with a flourish.

The Doctor rocked back on his heels; Love’s Labour’s Won was one of the greatest literary mysteries of the ages.


Rose looked up at the Doctor. Did you see…

He nodded. Something’s not right, but we promised Martha just a quick trip to say thank you.

Ask if she’d be okay with staying a bit longer.
Martha actually brought it up herself on their way out of the theatre. “I’m not an expert, but I’ve never heard of Love’s Labour’s Won.”

The Doctor blew out a breath. “Exactly. The lost play. It doesn’t exist—only in rumours. It’s mentioned in lists of his plays but never ever turns up. And no one knows why.”

“Have you got a mini-disc or something?” Martha asked. “We can tape it. We can flog it. Sell it when we get home and make a mint.”

“No,” the Doctor and Rose said in unison, visions of clicky-forehead Adam coming to mind. To her credit, Martha caught on immediately. “That would be bad.”

The Doctor nodded a few times, a disapproving frown still on his face. “Yeah, yeah.”

“Well, how come it disappeared in the first place?” Martha said, asking the question of the hour. Rose and the Doctor exchanged a glance, which didn’t go unnoticed by Martha. “What? Do you know something?”

“We don’t actually,” Rose told her.

“We were just going to give you a quick little trip in the TARDIS,” the Doctor said, “but if you’re game, Miss Jones, I think this warrants a bit of investigation.” Martha’s bright smile was all the answer they needed. After asking around a little, the Doctor found out where Shakespeare lived and they set off.

“Will there be space rhinos this time?” Martha asked as they walked through London.

“Nope. No, the Judoon don’t have jurisdiction on Earth, so we won’t see them.”

Martha nodded. “Oh right, that’s why they took us to the moon. But do you think it’s alien?”

“It might be nothing more than the play not being well-received and Shakespeare throwing away every copy,” Rose said, though she highly doubted that was the case.

“Here we are!” the Doctor said when they reached The Elephant. The stable was on the ground storey, so they climbed the outside stairs up to the front door, then filed into the inn. “We’re looking for Shakespeare,” he said.

The disinterested barmaid pointed to the stairs. “Top of the stairs, all the way down,” she said.

Rose watched in amusement as the Doctor took the stairs two at a time, his coat flapping behind him. “Is he always like this?” Martha asked.

“Enthusiastic and talking a mile a minute?” Rose said. “Most of the time.”

They reached the upper storey in time to see the Doctor skid to a halt at the end of the hallway. “Hello!” He knocked on the door twice, then entered the room. “Excuse me, not interrupting, am I? Mr. Shakespeare, isn’t it?”

Peeking around the Doctor, Rose saw Shakespeare put his hand to his forehead. “Oh, no. No, no, no. Who let you in? No autographs. No, you can’t have yourself sketched with me. And please don’t ask where I get my ideas from. Thanks for the interest. Now be a good boy and shove——”
Rose raised an eyebrow when his eyes widened appreciatively as his gaze landed on her and Martha. “Hey, nonny nonny. Sit right down here next to me,” he said, gesturing to the chairs on either side of him.

The Doctor took Rose’s hand, a move she didn’t think went unnoticed by Shakespeare.

The playwright looked at the other men sitting at the table and waved them off. “You two get sewing on them costumes. Off you go.”

“Come on, lads,” the innkeeper said, patting them on the back. “I think our William’s found a new muse—or maybe two.”

“Sweet lady,” Shakespeare said, addressing Martha alone this time. They sat down across the table from him, and he kept his attention focused on her. “Such unusual clothes. So… fitted.”

He leered at her, and Martha laughed nervously. “Er, verily, forsooth, egads.”

“No, no, don’t do that,” the Doctor said, reminding Rose of a time when she’d attempted a Scottish brogue. “Don’t.”

He held out the psychic paper to Shakespeare. “I’m Sir Doctor of TARDIS and this is my wife, Dame Rose of the Powell Estate. Miss Martha Jones here is our companion.”

“Interesting, that bit of paper.” Shakespeare tapped his finger against it. “It’s blank.”

The Doctor gaped at Shakespeare like a giddy schoolboy meeting his idol. “Oh, that’s… very clever. That proves it. Absolute genius.”

Shakespeare rolled his eyes at that, apparently having heard the compliment one too many times to be flattered.

Martha pointed to the paper. “No, it says so right there. Sir Doctor, Dame Rose, Martha Jones. It says so.”

Shakespeare looked at her. “And I say it’s blank.”

“Psychic paper, Martha,” Rose interjected. “Basically, it says what we want it to say… unless the person looking at it is too brilliant to be fooled.”

“Psychic?” Shakespeare repeated, tilting his head back as he considered the word. “Never heard that before, and words are my trade. Who are you exactly?” He looked back at Martha and leaned his chin on his fist. “More to the point, who is your delicious blackamoor lady?”

Martha’s jaw dropped. “What did you say?”

Shakespeare winced. “Oops. Isn’t that a word we use nowadays?” He looked at the Doctor and Rose, then back at Martha. “An Ethiop girl? A swarth? A Queen of Afric?”

Martha looked over at the Doctor and Rose, shocked amusement on her face. “I can’t believe I’m hearing this.”

The Doctor rubbed at his eye, searching for a way to explain Shakespeare to Martha, and vice-versa. “It’s political correctness gone mad,” he told her, then turned to the playwright. “Er, Martha’s from a far-off land. Freedonia.”

“Excuse me!” The Doctor turned around and saw a well-dressed man wearing the gold chain that
identified him as the Master of the Revels. “Hold hard a moment. This is abominable behaviour,” he said, stepping forward with his eyes fixed on Shakespeare. “A new play with no warning? I demand to see a script, Mr. Shakespeare. As Master of the Revels, every new script must be registered at my office and examined by me before it can be performed.

The lines around Shakespeare’s mouth tightened, and the Doctor had a feeling this wasn’t the first time he’d butted heads with the Master of the Revels. “Tomorrow morning, first thing, I’ll send it round.”

“I don’t work to your schedule,” the man said, his voice deceptively soft. “You work to mine. The script, now!”

“I can’t!”

The man drew himself up in malicious triumph. “Then tomorrow’s performance is cancelled.”

“It’s all go around here, isn’t it?” Martha muttered as the man strode to the door, and Shakespeare smirked in reply.

“I’m returning to my office for a banning order.” He stopped at the door and looked back at Shakespeare once more. “If it’s the last thing I do, Love’s Labour’s Won will never be played.”

The mistress of the house entered the room with three more tankards of ale moments after he swept out of the room. “Was that Lynley I saw leaving, Will?” she asked as she set the drinks down in front of the Doctor, Martha, and Rose.

“It was, Dolly. He’s all indignation because I didn’t tell him I was going to stage my new play tomorrow.”

Dolly put her tray under her arm and looked at Will reproachfully. “You know better than to announce a new play before it’s been cleared by the Master of the Revels, Will,” she chided.

Shakespeare shrugged, an impish grin on his face, and Dolly sighed and left the room.

“Well then, mystery solved,” Martha said. “That’s Love’s Labour’s Won over and done with. Thought it might be something more, you know, more mysterious.”

A man screamed in the street, and Rose gratefully put down her ale and ran out of the inn with everyone else—Elizabethan ale wasn’t quite what she was used to. “Lesson one of travelling with us, Martha,” she panted. “Saying things like that guarantees that things will suddenly get worse.”

Lynley was staggering around the courtyard, his hands on his neck and water spewing out of his mouth. “It’s that Lynley bloke,” Martha said.

“What’s wrong with him?” the Doctor asked. Lynley took another step towards them, more water pouring out of his mouth. Rose, watch the people, the Doctor told her. See if anyone’s acting unusually. I don’t think this was an accident.

“Leave it to me. I’m a doctor.” He strode over to the man and took him by the arm, holding him up.

Martha followed the Doctor and took Lynley’s other arm. “So am I, near enough.”

Lynley groaned loudly and collapsed onto the straw. Martha put her head to his chest, then muttered, “Got to get the heart going.”
Leaving attempts to revive Lynley to Martha, the Doctor jumped up and jogged over to the street the Master of the Revels had entered the courtyard from, looking for an assailant still lurking in the shadows. There wasn’t anyone there, which meant whatever had done this might be in the courtyard still.

He ran back to the dead man and put his hand on Martha’s shoulder before she could bend over to do CPR. Water gurgled up from Lynley’s mouth, and she gasped. “What the hell is that?”

“I’ve never seen a death like it,” the Doctor said, taking in his vitals. “His lungs are full of water. He drowned and then, I don’t know, like a blow to the heart, an invisible blow.”

He stood up and spotted Dolly, standing right behind him. “Good mistress, this poor fellow has died from a sudden imbalance of the humours. A natural, if unfortunate, demise. Call a constable and have him taken away.”

She nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“I’ll do it, ma’am,” a serving girl replied, then turned and walked swiftly away.

*She was acting funny the whole time, Doctor.*

The Doctor narrowed his eyes and looked at the girl more closely.

“And why are you telling them that?” Martha demanded quietly.

The Doctor sighed. “This lot still have got one foot in the Dark Ages. If I tell them the truth, they’ll panic and think it was witchcraft.”

She nodded quickly. “Okay, what was it then?”

He thought of the girl Rose had pointed out and the odd sequence of events leading to Lynley’s death. “Witchcraft.”

**oOoOoOoOo**

Will invited them back up to his room, and they all filed soberly back upstairs.

“I got you and your wife a room, Sir Doctor,” Dolly told them. “You’re just across the landing from Will here, and Miss Jones is in the room next to you.”

Will slouched against the table. “Poor Lynley. So many strange events.” He looked sharply at Martha. “Not least of all, this land of Freedonia where a woman can be a doctor?”

“Where a woman can do what she likes,” Martha retorted.

Something in Shakespeare’s eyes told the Doctor he was seeing through their disguise. The playwright blinked, then looked at the Doctor. “And you, Sir Doctor. How can a man so young have eyes so old?”

“I do a lot of reading,” the Doctor said, his tone saying the conversation was over.

Will nodded. “A trite reply, yeah. That’s what I’d do.” He looked at Rose, then back at the Doctor. “Your wife knows you well, but she’s the only one.”

“That’s what it means to be married, right?” Rose said, trying to redirect the conversation.
Will just raised an eyebrow and looked at Martha. “And you? You look at them like you’re surprised they exist. They’re as much of a puzzle to you as they are to me.”

Martha exchanged looks with the Doctor and Rose. “I think we should say goodnight.” Rose nodded and followed her out of the room, leaving the Doctor alone with Shakespeare for a few minutes.

Will looked away from the Doctor. “I must work. I have a play to complete.”

The Doctor walked to the door slowly, feeling both uncomfortably exposed and disturbed by the unexplained death they’d just witnessed.

Will stood up and walked over to the desk in front of the window. “But I’ll get my answers tomorrow, Doctor, and I’ll discover more about you and why this constant performance of yours.”

The Doctor hesitated by the door, but he couldn’t resist. “All the world’s a stage,” he said, unsure if Will had started writing *As You Like It* or not.

“Hmm.” Will sat back in his chair and gave the Doctor a look that said he hadn’t evaded the playwright’s questions entirely. “I might use that. Goodnight, Doctor.”

The Doctor was unused to the feeling of being dismissed, and he discovered he didn’t much care for it. “Nighty night, Shakespeare,” he muttered, trying not to scowl.

“You didn’t have to come with me,” Martha told Rose as they left Shakespeare’s room.

“Actually, I was thinking we should probably all talk before we turn in, so I was going to ask you to come into our room for a minute.”

She opened the door and let Martha go in first. The room was sparsely decorated, but the bed against the opposite wall was big enough for them both to sit on. Rose sat down cross-legged in front of the large red velvet pillows and patted the bed, inviting Martha to do the same.

“I reckon Shakespeare was onto something, wasn’t he?” Rose asked, trying to draw Martha’s attention away from Shakespeare’s insightful questions.

Martha looked down at the bedspread, and Rose took a deep breath. Deflecting wasn’t going to work, apparently.

“Okay then, are there any questions you want to ask? I guarantee you’ll get more answers from me than you will from the Doctor.”

Martha snorted. “Yeah, I’d already worked that bit out.”

She leaned back on her arms and looked up at the ceiling. Rose waited patiently for her to sort out which questions she wanted to ask first, and a moment later, Martha looked back at her.

“Well, start at the beginning, I guess. How long have you travelled with the Doctor?”

The Doctor entered their borrowed bedchamber and leaned against the wall. “Three years, one month, two weeks, and three days,” he said.

Martha looked from him back to Rose. “Right. And you’ve been together all that time?”

He shook his head and pushed off the wall, tugging at his tie as he crossed the room. “No, that only
started one year and four days ago.”

Rose reached up and linked her hand through his. “And we got married six months and two weeks ago,” she said, answering the question before Martha could ask.

Martha blinked. “I guess you’ll never forget your anniversary.”

The Doctor and Rose laughed. “Now there’s a benefit to time senses that I hadn’t considered, Doctor,” Rose teased.

“I take it we’re going to talk about what’s going on?” the Doctor asked. Rose nodded, and he looked at the two of them, taking up the entire bed. “Where am I supposed to sit?”

Rose pointed to a bench against the window, and he dragged it over. “All right, where shall we begin?” he asked.

“Well, magic and stuff,” Martha said. “That’s a surprise. It’s all a little bit Harry Potter.”

The Doctor leaned back and smiled. “Oh, I loved book seven.”

“He cried,” Rose whispered to Martha.

“Oh, I wasn’t the only one, Rose Tyler.” The Doctor pointed at her. “‘Here lies Dobby, a free elf.’ Need I remind you?”

“But is it real, though?” Martha asked eagerly. “I mean, witches, black magic and all that… It’s real?”

The Doctor made a face. “Course it isn’t!” Rose glared at him, and he looked at Martha. “Oh. That was rude, wasn’t it?”

“A bit, yeah,” Martha said. “I’ve only just started believing in time travel—give me a break.”

“Right. Sorry. It’s just been a long time since I’ve travelled with someone new.”

Rose mentally cheered for Martha. She missed having a friend around, but if you travelled with the Doctor, you couldn’t be so awed by who he was that it kept you from standing up for yourself.

The Doctor jumped up and started pacing the room, running his hand through his hair as he did so. “Looks like witchcraft, but it isn’t. Can’t be. There’s such a thing as psychic energy, but a human couldn’t channel it like that. Not without a generator the size of Taunton and I think we’d have spotted that. No, there’s something I’m missing.”

Rose caught Martha trying to hide a yawn. “Well for one, you’re missing that Martha’s probably been up for almost 24 hours.”

“Oh, humans and your need for sleep,” the Doctor grumbled.

“Go to bed, Martha. We’ll give you a shout in the morning.”

Martha looked from the Doctor to Rose, eyes tired, but clearly unwilling to miss anything. “Are you sure? If I could help…”

“No, go on,” Rose told her. “The Doctor will pace a bit and talk to himself; you won’t miss much.”

“Thanks.” Martha stood up and grimaced. “I wish I had some kind of toiletries with me.”
“Oh!” The Doctor reached into his inside jacket pocket and pulled out a toothbrush. “Contains Venusian spearmint.”

“Right. Good night then.” Martha took the proffered toothbrush and left the room.

“What am I missing, Rose?” the Doctor asked once Martha was gone. “There’s something there, something right in front of me.”

Rose shifted on the bed until she was sitting with her back against the tapestry on the wall and her feet out in front of her. She patted the empty space next to her and said, “Sit with me, and we’ll work through it together.”

He hung his jacket up next to his coat, then sat down next to her. “All right then, Miss Tyler,” he said as he unbuttoned and rolled up his sleeves. “What have you come up with?”

“Well, first of all, it seems like this is definitely about Shakespeare. That moment in the theatre when he suddenly announced the play’s performance, and then Lynley dying—the one person who could prevent it from happening.”

The Doctor nodded. “Put together with the mystery of the lost play, and that’s compelling evidence. But who would care so much about a play? And who could kill a man without touching him?”

Rose ran her tongue over her teeth. “Doctor, you said humans couldn’t channel psychic energy. Are there other species that could?” She remembered the young woman who’d acted so strangely. “Species that look like humanoid females?”

The Doctor stared at Rose for so long that she almost felt self-conscious. “What?” she asked.

“Nothing. It’s just… you are absolutely brilliant, Rose. Completely and utterly brilliant.” He pressed a kiss to her lips. “The most obvious answer, and I completely missed it. I said so, didn’t I?”

“Good thing I’m around to point out the obvious answers to you,” Rose teased.

The Doctor shook his head at his bond mate. “That is only one of the many reasons I’m glad you’re around.”

Rose scooted closer and rested her head on his shoulder. A moment later, he felt their bond deepen from the constant connection to full telepathic communion.

Yes, he agreed as he welcomed her mental touch. This is another reason. But even if you weren’t telepathic, even if we couldn’t share this, I would still want you here with me, in whatever way was possible.

Timelines blurred, and for a moment, they could see a version of this trip without her. An awkward conversation with Martha and a Doctor who needed Rose’s complementary strengths—the image came and went quickly, but it left them feeling just as grateful as they always did when they were reminded of how close they’d come to losing each other.

Rose yawned, and the Doctor slid down onto the bed, pulling her along with him. “Come on. You still need some sleep.”

She rolled over and blew out the candle, then curled up into his side.

The Doctor lay awake after Rose fell asleep, thinking about the ideas she’d given him. There were other species who could harness psychic energy in a way that would look like witchcraft. The
problem was, there were too many of them for that to narrow it down much. The fact that Rose had seen a young woman helped a little, especially since he knew she wasn’t wearing a shimmer.

But still… there’s one last thing, one piece I don’t have yet.

A scream pierced the air, interrupting his thoughts. Rose woke up instantly and they ran from the room, joining Martha in the hallway as they all went to Shakespeare’s room.

Dolly lay on the floor, and the Doctor bent down to check her pulse, sad but not surprised when he didn’t find one.

At his desk, Will was looking around groggily. Rose looked down at him worriedly, and he asked, “What? What was that?”

“Her heart gave out,” the Doctor said. “She died of fright.” Will looked shocked, and Rose went over to stand by him.

“Doctor?” Martha said from the window.

There wasn’t anything out of the ordinary when he joined her. “What did you see?”

She blinked twice. “A witch.”

oOoOoOoOo

It took hours to deal with the aftermath surrounding Dolly’s death. Rousing the constable in the middle of the night was harder than it should have been, and even then he had a few more questions than any of them felt comfortable answering, given that this was the second death on the premises that night.

It was almost dawn when everything was cleared away, and Rose, the Doctor, and Martha were sitting across Will’s desk. The light coming in the window brightened, and a cockerel crowed. (The Doctor thought that was pretty cliche, since cockerels crow whenever they feel like it.)

Will paced in front of the window. “Oh, sweet Dolly Bailey. She sat out three bouts of the plague in this place when we all ran like rats. But what could have scared her so? She had such enormous spirit.” He sat down and stared right through them, his shock putting him in a daze.

The Doctor rubbed his hands over his face. “Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

Will pointed at him. “I might use that.”

“You can’t. It’s someone else’s.”

“Do not go gentle into that good night,” Rose murmured, and he felt grief for the woman’s needless death in her compassionate heart.

“But the thing is,” Martha said, “Lynley drowned on dry land, Dolly died of fright, and they were both connected to you.”

Will leaned away from her. “You’re accusing me?”

“No,” she assured him, “but I saw a witch, big as you like, flying, cackling away, and you’ve written about witches.”

“I have?” Will asked. “When was that?”
The Doctor shook his head minutely at Martha. Shakespeare was brilliant, and she’d mentioned enough anachronisms to rouse his curiosity. “Not, not quite yet,” he said out of the side of his mouth, hoping the playwright wouldn’t hear.

Will seemed to let it slide. “Peter Streete spoke of witches.”

“Who’s Peter Streete?” Rose asked.

“Our builder. He sketched the plans to the Globe.”

“The architect,” the Doctor said, and his mind latched onto the idea. “Hold on. The architect! The architect!” He slapped his palm down on the desk, then jumped to his feet. “The Globe! Come on!”

He ran out of the room and down the stairs, trusting the others to follow him. A hand slipped into his as he burst into the courtyard, and he looked over at Rose. “I’m so close,” he told her as they turned a corner. “I was thinking earlier that I’m just missing one piece, and I think the last clue has something to do with the theatre.”

When they reached the theatre, Will unlocked the door and let them in. “The actors should be here soon to begin rehearsing for tonight,” he told them.

The Doctor stood in the pit, slowly turning around to take in the design of the theatre. “The columns there, right?” He shook his head; the columns weren’t what mattered. “Fourteen sides.” He faced the stage where Will was standing, holding the play manuscript. “I’ve always wondered, but I never asked. Tell me, Will. Why fourteen sides?”

“It was the shape Peter Streete thought best, that’s all,” Will said, gesturing vaguely with the sheaf of paper in his hands. “Said it carried the sound well.”

“Fourteen.” He spun again, trying to put his finger on the missing detail. “Why does that ring a bell? Fourteen.”

“There are fourteen lines in a sonnet,” Martha offered.

The Doctor nodded, impressed by her logic. “So there is. Good point. Words and shapes following the same design. Fourteen lines, fourteen sides, fourteen facets.” He tugged on his hair. “Oh, my head. Tetradecagon. Think, think, think! Words, letters, numbers, lines!”

“And humanoid females who can channel psychic energy,” Rose reminded him.

Will looked at them, baffled. “This is just a theatre.”

The Doctor spun back around to look at him. “Oh yeah, but a theatre’s magic, isn’t it? You should know. Stand on this stage,” the Doctor said, leaning against it, “say the right words with the right emphasis at the right time. Oh, you can make men weep, or cry with joy. Change them. You can change people’s minds just with words in this place.”

The power of words—the answer was on the tip of his tongue, but he couldn’t quite grasp it. “But if you exaggerate that,” he said quietly, letting the sentence hang unfinished while he tried to wrangle his thoughts.

“It’s like your police box,” Martha suggested. “Small wooden box with all that power inside.”

The Doctor nodded in approval. “Oh. Oh, Martha Jones, I like you.” Switching his attention to Will, he said, “Tell you what, though. Peter Streete would know. Can I talk to him?”
Will shook his head. “You won’t get an answer. A month after finishing this place,” he said, gesturing to the open roof, “he lost his mind.”

Martha looked over at him. “Why?”

“What happened?” asked Rose.

He shrugged. “Started raving about witches, hearing voices, babbling. His mind was addled.”

Witches again. Now the Doctor was certain he needed to talk to the architect. “Where is he now?”

“Bedlam.”

“What’s Bedlam?” Martha asked, unfamiliar with the history of the oldest mental institution in the world.


The Doctor turned and headed for the door, his long strides moving quickly. “We’re going to go there. Right now. Come on.”

“Wait! I’m coming with you,” Will insisted. “I want to witness this at first hand.”

Two men entered the pit as the Doctor was leaving, and Will called out to them. “Ralph, the last scene as promised. Copy it, hand it round, learn it, speak it.”

Out on the street, Rose caught up with the Doctor and jogged beside him. He slowed his pace so she could keep up more easily, and she turned and walked backwards a few steps, watching him as they talked.

“So… fourteen, and witches. Getting any ideas?”

“I think so, and unless I’m wrong, we need to see Peter Street to learn where they are. The fact that he claimed to see witches too certainly implies that the same creatures who killed Lynley and Dolly had a hand in designing the theatre. But why?”

Behind them, Will walked alongside Martha. “So, tell me of Freedonia, where women can be doctors, writers, actors.”

He’s chatting her up, Rose said, amused.

“This country’s ruled by a woman,” Martha pointed out.

“Ah, she’s royal. That’s God’s business. Though you are a royal beauty.”

Oh, my god. What a line.

The Doctor reached for her hand and tugged her closer. Rose’s amusement shifted, now directed at him. Your line was better.

He shot her a sidelong glance. I didn’t use a line.

“Did I mention, it also travels in time?” Rose quoted, drawing a reluctant smile from the Doctor.

Martha and Will were still standing in the street, and the Doctor walked back to prod them along. “Come on. We can all have a good flirt later.”
Will looked the Doctor up and down. “Is that a promise, Doctor?”

Rose’s amusement finally broke out into giggles, and the Doctor looked at them all, nearly speechless. “Oh, fifty-seven academics just punched the air. Now move!”
Chapter Notes

AN: Today is my birthday, and in a lucky coincidence, I get to post one of my favourite chapters to date. Why do I love it? Protective!Doctor makes an appearance, there's just enough romance not to derail the story, and Martha is—as always—amazing. Now, if you're wishing you could give me a birthday present as good as the one I gave myself, comments are the best gift possible.

Rose looked around as they walked towards Bishopsgate. *It's so weird, seeing places I know that are just enough different from what I'm used to.*

*This is London before the Great Fire,* the Doctor said. *Before Christopher Wren rebuilt it.*

Rose glanced over at him. *You're not going to claim you helped?*

*Welllll…* The Doctor tugged on his ear. *It's possible—just possible, mind—that I actually had something to do with the fire itself.*

She chuckled, then laughed harder when she caught sight of the business on the next corner. *Maybe it's not too different, after all,* she said, pointing to a door with an apothecary sign hanging overhead. *That's a Boots, in my time.*

A bend in the road brought the city wall into view. Even with everything else that was different, seeing an actual gate where there hadn’t been one in years brought Rose up short. *Yeah, this is definitely weird.*

When they reached the hospital, the Doctor flashed the psychic paper at the keeper, who immediately let them in. “Does my Lord Doctor wish some entertainment while he waits?” he asked as he led them through the hospital “I’d whip these madmen. They’ll put on a good show for you. Mad dog in Bedlam.”

“No, I don’t!” the Doctor stated unequivocally.

The keeper blinked, but the Doctor’s credentials kept him from questioning him. “Well, wait here, my lords, while I, ah… make him decent for the ladies.”

Rose watched him walk down the long corridor of cells, disgust curling in her gut. Men were kept here, apparently naked, and under constant threat of a beating for someone’s amusement.

“So this is what you call a hospital, yeah?” Martha said, quiet anger brewing beneath the calm words. “Where the patients are whipped to entertain the gentry? And you put your friend in here?”

Will shifted uncomfortably. “Oh, it’s all so different in Freedonia,” he said sarcastically.

Distant screaming echoed along the rough stone walls, and Martha’s features hardened slightly. “But you’re clever. Do you honestly think this place is any good?”

A stubborn light entered Will’s eyes. “I’ve been mad. I’ve lost my mind. Fear of this place set me
right again.” He nodded. “It serves its purpose.”

Rose put her hand on Martha’s arm, then looked at Will. “What happened?” she asked, seeing the loss in his eyes.

But it was the Doctor who answered. “You lost your son.”

Will nodded, and Rose finally saw the grief he tried to hide with his flamboyant personality and flirtatious behaviour. “My only boy. The Black Death took him. I wasn’t even there.”

Rose felt some of the tension ease out of Martha. “I’m sorry,” she said compassionately, and Martha echoed her.

“It made me question everything,” Will said. “The futility of this fleeting existence. To be or not to be.” His eyes brightened. “Oh, that’s quite good.”

The Doctor’s lips quirked up in a half smile. “You should write that down.”

Will demurred. “Maybe not. A bit pretentious?”

The keeper interrupted the Doctor’s answer. “This way, my lord!”

The momentary lightness was lost in the gloom again as they followed the keeper to Peter Streete’s cell. “They can be dangerous, my lord,” he said as he let them in. “Don’t know their own strength.”

Seeing the pathetic man sitting on a rope bed dressed in rags, the Doctor’s patience expired. “I think it helps if you don’t whip them. Now get out!”

The keeper rolled his eyes before he left the cell, but the Doctor didn’t care what he thought about the lord with the strange notions of justice.

He walked slowly towards the cowering man. “Peter? Peter Streete?”

Peter didn’t answer, and Will shook his head. “He’s the same as he was. You’ll get nothing out of him.”

Rose crouched down on the floor and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Peter?”

Peter suddenly flung his head back and looked at them with wild eyes. He wasn’t mad; he was terrified, and his mind had retreated from the fright. Rose, the Doctor said, I’m going to see if I can get past this madness.

She nodded and moved out of the way so he could get down on eye level with the architect. The Doctor placed his hands gently on Peter’s temples and put up light memory blocks around the more recent events in his life.

“Peter, I’m the Doctor,” he said as he worked. “Go into the past. One year ago. Let your mind go back. Back to when everything was fine and shining.” Peter shook violently, and the Doctor continued to speak as he would to a skittish animal—slowly and softly. “Everything that happened in this year since happened to somebody else. It was just a story. A winter’s tale. Let go.” The fear finally loosened its hold on Peter’s mind, and the Doctor lowered him to his bed. “That’s it. That’s it, just let go.”

The Doctor stood up and looked down on the man, still wide-eyed with terror, even though it no longer had a hold of his sanity. “Tell me the story, Peter,” he said, his anger at the man’s condition
seeping into his voice. “Tell me about the witches.”

“Witches spoke to Peter,” he began, his voice surprisingly clear. “In the night, they whispered. They whispered.” Peter’s hand twitched by his ear, visually representing the constant whispering. “Got Peter to build the Globe to their design. Their design! The fourteen walls. Always fourteen. When the work was done,” he said, then laughed for a moment before he realised it wasn’t funny, “they snapped poor Peter’s wits.”

“Where did Peter see the witches? Where in the city?” Peter panted in fear, and the Doctor crouched down next to him, needing to get the information before the temporary memory blocks failed. “Peter, tell me. You’ve got to tell me—where were they?”

Peter shuddered again, then a determined look crossed his face. “All Hallows Street,” he said, with sudden conviction.

“Too many words,” a voice suddenly hissed from behind the Doctor.

He spun away from the voice to stand next to Rose. A hag stood at the other end of the cell, her back hunched and her eyes gleaming with malice.

“What the hell?” Rose and Martha said together.

“Just one touch of the heart,” she said, bending slowly over Peter.

“No!” the Doctor shouted, but it was too late to stop her from killing him.

The hag pressed her finger to Peter’s heart and gasped in pleasure as the man died.

“Witch! I’m seeing a witch!” Will stammered, pointing at her.

“Now, who would be next, hmm?” she asked, waggling her fingers at them. “Just one touch. Oh, oh, I’ll stop your frantic hearts. Poor, fragile mortals.”

But seeing her true form verified the Doctor’s earlier suspicion. “Oh, let’s not be too hasty!” he said, stepping out in front of her. “I’ve got some magic of my own.”

She scoffed at his threat. “No mortal has power over me.”

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. “Oh, but there’s a power in words. Humanoid female, uses shapes and words to channel energy, with a fixation on the number fourteen?” He rattled the list off, enjoying her increasing unease. “Say, as in the fourteen stars of the Rexel planetary configuration? Creature, I name you Carrionite!”

The Carrionite shrieked and disappeared in a flash of light.

Rose, Martha, and Will stepped forward slowly. “What did you do?” Rose asked.

The Doctor stared at the empty space where the Carrionite had stood. “I named her. The power of a name. That’s old magic.”

Martha shook her head. “But there’s no such thing as magic.”

“Well, it’s just a different sort of science,” the Doctor explained. “You lot, you chose mathematics. Given the right string of numbers, the right equation, you can split the atom.” Martha nodded, following along with what he was saying. “Carrionites use words instead,” he concluded.
Will looked at Peter’s body, then at the Doctor. “Use them for what?”

The Doctor set his jaw. “The end of the world.”

It took forty-five minutes to get back to The Elephant. In Will’s room, the Doctor paced the floor, sharing what he knew. “The Carrionites disappeared way back at the dawn of the universe. Nobody was sure if they were real or legend.”

Will stood up from a basin of water, his face dripping. “Well, I’m going for real,” he said as he towelled off.

“What do they want, though?” Rose asked.

The Doctor leaned against the table. “A new empire on Earth. A world of bones and blood and witchcraft.”

“But how?” Martha asked.

“I’m looking at the man with the words,” he said, staring at Will.

“Me?” he said, a dumbfounded expression on his face. “But I’ve done nothing.”

“Hold on, though,” Martha said. “What were you doing last night, when that Carrionite was in the room?”

Will frowned and spread his hand out over the table. “Finishing the play.”

“Yeah?” Rose asked, catching on to what Martha was saying. “And how’s it end, then?”

He shrugged. “The boys get the girls. They have a bit of a dance. It’s all as funny and thought-provoking as usual.” He stopped and looked at them, wide-eyed. “Except those last few lines. Funny thing is, I don’t actually remember writing them.”

The Doctor straightened up and walked towards Will. “That’s it. They used you.” It was obvious, now that he had all the pieces. “They gave you the final words like a spell, like a code. Love’s Labour’s Won. It’s a weapon. The right combination of words, spoken at the right place, with the shape of the Globe as an energy converter! The play’s the thing!” He spun around, then turned back to Will. “And yes, you can have that.”

“What do we need, Doctor?” Shakespeare asked.

“Food first,” Rose said before the Doctor could reply. He looked at her in surprise. “None of us have eaten since dinner last night.”

Will nodded. “I’ll go downstairs and see about getting some food sent up.”

After he left the room, Rose looked at the Doctor and grinned. “So. Shakespeare and witches,” she said irrepressibly.

He laughed. “I know! Although Macbeth was never my favourite.”

“I thought you were supposed to call it ‘The Scottish Play,’” Martha interjected.

The Doctor listed off his counterpoints on his fingers. “One, we aren’t in a theatre, and two, I really
don’t believe in superstitions.”

“And three, it hasn’t even been written yet,” Rose added.

Martha rolled her eyes. “All right, fine. Then what’s so funny about Shakespeare and witches? Besides the obvious, I mean.”

Rose crossed her left leg over her right knee. “When we met Dickens, there were ghosts.”

“Oh that’s… Your life is mad,” Martha said, but she was smiling. “Next you’re going to tell me you’ve solved a mystery with Agatha Christie.”

Rose smirked at her. “Not yet we haven’t, but might do someday.”

Will returned then, interrupting any conversation of time travel. He set down a tray of drinks and passed them around. Rose took a sip of hers and managed not to cough this time. Elizabethan ale must be growing on me, she mused.

They ate quickly, all of them keenly aware of the waning daylight. As soon as the platters were cleared away, the Doctor leaned across the table. “Do you have a map, Will? We need to find the witches’ house.”

Will opened a drawer and rummaged through some papers, pulling out a piece of parchment. The Doctor put his glasses on, snatched the map from Will’s hand, and pored over it quickly.

“All Hallows Street.” He pointed at a spot in the City, halfway between London Bridge and the Tower of London. “There it is. Rose, Martha, we’ll track them down.” He looked up at Will. “Will, you get to the Globe. Whatever you do, stop that play.”

“I’ll do it.” Will shook his head. “All these years I’ve been the cleverest man around,” he said, holding his hand out for the Doctor to shake. “Next to you, I know nothing.”

“It’s something new, isn’t it?” Rose asked, seeing the admiration in his eyes.

He laughed. “It’s marvellous. Good luck, Doctor.”

“Good luck, Shakespeare.” The Doctor put his glasses away, grabbed his coat, and jogged towards the door. “Once more unto the breach.”

“I like that,” Will called out. “Wait a minute, that’s one of mine.”

The Doctor stuck his head back into the room. “Oh, just shift!”

As they ran across London Bridge for the third time that day, Martha said, “You know, I never would have thought so much of alien hunting was just… running.”

“Why d’you think I wear trainers?” Rose said.

Martha laughed. “I guess I’ll need to learn to run in all kinds of footwear.”

She’s already counting on travelling with us for a while, Rose said to the Doctor.

I don’t know if she even realises what she just said. Let’s get this taken care of, and then we can talk about it.

They jogged down a narrow alley, then the Doctor slowed and looked around. “All Hallows Street,
“The thing is though,” Martha said, “am I missing something here? The world didn’t end in 1599. It just didn’t. Look at me. I’m living proof.”

“Time isn’t like that, Martha,” Rose explained. “It’s not static.”

“What do you mean, time’s not static?” Her eyes widened. “You mean things can change?”

“Yes,” the Doctor said. “It’s like Back to the Future.”

Martha blinked. “The film?”

“No, the novelisation,” he responded sarcastically. “Yes, the film. Marty McFly goes back and changes history.”

“And he starts fading away.” The penny dropped. “Oh my God, am I going to fade?”

“You and the entire future of the human race,” he said seriously. “It ends right now in 1599 if we don’t stop it. But which house?” he asked again.

The door in front of them creaked open. “Ah. Make that witch house.”

Rose groaned. “I think your puns are getting worse,” she told him as they stepped inside.

The main sitting room looked normal enough, but the Doctor pointed to a curtain hanging along one wall. He lifted it up and they saw another room behind it.

The young woman Rose had noticed in the courtyard the night before was waiting for them. “I take it we’re expected,” the Doctor said.

She looked at him speculatively. “Oh, I think death has been waiting for you a very long time.”

Rose raised an eyebrow, but before she or the Doctor could ask how she knew that, Martha spoke up.

“Right then, it’s my turn.” She pointed a finger at the witch. “I know how to do this. I name thee Carrionite!”

Instead of fading away on a shriek, the witch gasped, then giggled.

“What did I do wrong?” Martha asked. “Was it the finger?”

“The power of a name works only once,” the witch explained. Then she pointed at Martha. “Observe. I gaze upon this bag of bones and now I name thee Martha Jones.”

Rose gasped when Martha fell back, unconscious, into the Doctor’s arms. “What have you done?” he demanded as he laid their friend down on the floor.

The witch looked at her finger as if it had betrayed her. “Only sleeping, alas. It’s curious. The name has less impact. She’s somehow out of her time. And as for you, Sir Doctor.” Rose was ready to step in front of the Doctor, but the witch paused and stared at him. “Fascinating. There is no name. Why would a man hide his title in such despair?” A smug smile crossed her face “Oh, but look. There’s still one name burned into your soul.”

The Doctor looked at her coldly. “The naming won’t work on me.”
The witch arched an eyebrow. “Sonnets doth your heart compose, all in the name of your fair Rose.”

Her finger moved from him to Rose at the last minute, and the Doctor’s vision greyed out as an echo of what passed through Rose reverberated over the bond. He blinked quickly and caught her as she fainted into his arms, then laid her down gently next to Martha before advancing on the creature.

“That was your last mistake,” he said quietly. “Her name doesn’t hurt me; it makes me stronger. And anyone who hurts her soon regrets it. The Carrionites vanished. Where did you go?”

She turned away in a huff. “The Eternals found the right word to banish us into deep darkness.”

“And how did you escape?”

“New words. New and glittering, from a mind like no other.”

So he’d been right. “Shakespeare.”

The Doctor stared at the image of Shakespeare in the bubbling cauldron as she continued to explain. Behind him, Rose was starting to regain consciousness, and he quickly worked out half a dozen ways to stop the witch before she could do any more damage.


“How many of you?” asked the Doctor, needing the information so he could be certain later that none of the Carrionites escaped.

She tilted her head back and looked down her nose at the Doctor. “Just the three. But the play tonight shall restore the rest. Then the human race will be purged as pestilence. And from this world we will lead the universe back into the old ways of blood and magic.”

The Doctor scratched his ear as he walked towards her. “Hmm. Busy schedule. But first you’ve got to get past me,” he said, looking her straight in the eye.

To his amusement, her demeanour turned seductive. “Oh, that should be a pleasure—” She traced his sideburn and leaned in even closer. “—considering my enemy has such a handsome shape.”

Her lips were practically brushing against his cheek, and he rolled his eyes. “Now, that’s one form of magic that’s definitely not going to work on me.”

“Oh, we’ll see.”

The Doctor felt a sharp yank on the back of his head, then the Carrionite backed away to the window. “What did you do?”

“Souvenir.” She held up a hank of his hair.

“Well, give it back.”

He ran towards her, but she threw her arms out and the window opened up behind her, allowing her to fly out into the open. The Doctor looked down at the ground from the upper storey, then at his adversary.

“Well, that’s just cheating.”

“Behold, Doctor. Men to Carrionites are nothing but puppets.”
She wrapped the hair around a small doll, and his eyes widened. Oh, this was not good. “Now, you might call that magic. I’d call that a DNA replication module.”

“What use is your science now?” she asked and stabbed the doll.

The Doctor screamed and fell to the ground when one of his hearts stopped.

*Right or left?* Rose asked, crawling over to him as the Carrionite laughed and flew away.

*Left.*

Rose helped him get to his feet. “Ah!” he exclaimed. He was vaguely aware that Martha was stirring, but he couldn’t focus on anything but his stopped heart. “How do you people cope with only one heart? I’ve got to get the other one started. Hit me! Hit me on the chest!”

She pounded her fist against the left side of his chest. “This seems familiar,” she pointed out over his groaning.

“But at least this time it’s only one, and I’m still conscious.” He bent over. “Now, on the back, on the back.” He groaned again when she hit him, hard. “Left a bit.”

Finally, his left heart fell back into rhythm, and he leaned back, stretching his ribcage. “Dah, lovely. There we go.” He jumped to his feet. “Badda boomba!” Apparently back to normal, he looked at Rose and Martha expectantly. “Well, what are you standing there for? Come on! The Globe!”

The Doctor ran back to the street and turned right. Rose and Martha ran after him, shouting, “We’re going the wrong way!”

“No, we’re not!” he said, changing directions a split second later. “We’re going the wrong way!”

When they turned the corner towards the Globe, they all skidded to a halt. A red cloud glowed above the theatre; Will hadn’t stopped the play.

“I told thee so!” crowed the preacher they’d seen the night before, clearly believing the end of the world was upon them. “I told thee!”

“Stage door!” the Doctor shouted over the shrieking and wailing wind.

They found Will backstage, just inside the door, looking like he’d just woken up. “Stop the play,” the Doctor said breathlessly. “I think that was it. Yeah, I said, stop the play!”

Will groaned and put his hand on the back of his head. “I hit my head.”

“Yeah, don’t rub it, you’ll go bald.” Thunder crashed overhead and he turned and ran towards the stage. “I think that’s my cue!”

The Doctor, Rose, Martha, and Will all ran out onto the stage. The frantic theatregoers were crowded around the doors, unable to get away from the imminent disaster.

As they stood there, wondering what to do next, a spiral of red light and swirling creatures rose into the air from the gallery, flying up towards the sky. The Carrionite who had tried to kill him earlier stood holding a crystal ball that functioned as one end of the portal, bringing her sisters to Earth.

*Words. They came in by the power of words, and only words can send them away.*

The Doctor turned and grabbed Will, pushing him to the front of the stage. “Come on, Will! History
“But what can I do?” the playwright protested.

The wind blowing around them picked up strength. There wasn’t much time left. “Reverse it!” the Doctor ordered.

Will gaped at him, then looked at the swarm of Carrionites hovering over his theatre. “How am I supposed to do that?”

“The shape of the Globe gives words power,” the Doctor explained, “but you’re the wordsmith, the one true genius. The only man clever enough to do it.”

“But what words? I have none ready!”

“You’re William Shakespeare!” the Doctor hollered, tapping him on the chest.

Will pointed up at the cackling witches. “But these Carrionite phrases, they need such precision.”

The Doctor lowered his voice so he was just talking to Will. “Trust yourself. When you’re locked away in your room, the words just come, don’t they—like magic? Words of the right sound, the right shape, the right rhythm. Words that last forever.” He put his hand on Will’s shoulder, looking up at the sky with him. “That’s what you do, Will. You choose perfect words. Do it. Improvise.”

The Doctor stepped back to watch with Rose and Martha, his hearts in his throat. Will could do it, he knew he could, but only if he believed.

Will took a half step forward, and for a moment, he did nothing but stare up at the sky. Just when the Doctor was getting worried, he started talking.

“Close up this din of hateful, dire decay,
decomposition of your witches’ plot.
You thieve my brains, consider me your toy.
My doting Doctor tells me I am not!
Foul Carrionite spectres, cease your show!
Between the points—”

He looked over at the Doctor, who rattled off the time-space coordinates. “Seven six one three nine oh!”

Will nodded. “Seven six one three nine oh!
Banished like a tinker’s cuss,
I say to thee—”

He paused again. This was the crucial moment, and with all the words the Doctor knew, he couldn’t think of the perfect one to steal power that rhymed with cuss. He looked from Rose to Martha, silently begging for help.

“Expelliarmus!” Martha shouted, pulling a piece of hair out of her mouth.
The Doctor nodded. “Expelliarmus!”

“Expelliarmus!” Will bellowed.

The tone of the shrieks changed from gleeful to angry, and a portal to the deep darkness opened, pulling the spiral of Carrionites into it.

“Good old JK!” the Doctor cheered, seeing the day was won. A powerful breeze swept through the backstage area of the theatre, pulling with it every copy of the play. “Love’s Labour’s Won. There it goes.”

The sky cleared with a crack and a final burst of light. The audience looked stunned, but after a moment, they started clapping.

The Doctor took a quick bow with Will, then left the stage to go up to the box the three Carrionites had been sitting in. The crystal ball they’d been holding was sitting on the rough wooden bench, and when he picked it up, they were screaming at him from inside, where they were trapped.

Rose was waiting for the Doctor backstage. “All taken care of then?” she asked as he hugged her.

“Yes!” He tossed the crystal ball in the air. “I know just the place to keep them, too—there’s a nice attic on the TARDIS where they can scream away for eternity.”

“We have an attic?”

“Mmm,” he affirmed. “More than one, actually. And a cellar or two.”

Rose shook her head. “I don’t know why I’m even surprised.” She snatched the Carrionites out of the air and peered down at them. “So, Martha was brilliant.”

“Yes, she was.”

Before they could continue their conversation, the object of their discussion entered the room, along with Shakespeare. “So, what now?” Martha asked.

The Doctor rocked back on his heels. “I’ll need to search the theatre, make sure there aren’t any copies of the play left. It’d be easier when no one’s around though, so unless you mind staying another night…”

“No!” Martha grinned brightly.

Before they could return to the inn, Will stuck his head into the room. “We always go back to the Elephant for a meal and a few pints after a performance. You were as much a part of tonight’s success as any of us, so I insist you come along, as my guests.”

“Well,” the Doctor said, “it’s hard to turn down an invitation to a cast party with William Shakespeare.”

They stayed in the dining room with Will and his friends Burbage and Kempe into the wee hours of the morning, only leaving when Martha was almost asleep at the table.

Alone in their room, Rose finally broached the topic of Martha. “So, what do you think?” she asked, knowing he would follow her train of thought.
“She’s definitely more than capable. Not afraid to call out customs that she doesn’t think are right—much like someone I remember who scolded a gentleman for his wandering hands.”

“Oh, he was asking for it,” Rose said, wrinkling her nose at the reminder of the Victorian undertaker. “She stands up to you, too.”

“Since when has that been a requirement for our companions?” the Doctor asked, miffed.

“Since always,” she replied pertly. He pouted, and she shook her head. “You’re amazing, Doctor, but you’re not always right. It’s important that people who travel with us aren’t so in awe of you that they don’t notice the times when you’re wrong.”

The Doctor sniffed, but he didn’t argue.

“So, what do you think?”

“Not sure yet. Let’s take her off-world; if she likes other planets, we can ask her to stay.” He looked down at her. “You know she won’t be a permanent addition, right? She’ll want to leave eventually to take her exams.”

Rose nodded. “Yeah, I know. But even then, once she’s gone home we’ll have someone to visit,” she said, finally letting the Doctor know the complete reason why she was so interested in travelling with a companion for a while.

“Ah.” The Doctor tugged her close and wrapped his arms around her. “You’re feeling like you don’t really have anyone left on Earth.”

“Well, there’s Jack and Sarah Jane, and now Alistair and Doris and Ian and Barbara, but… it would just be nice if we had a few more people we could visit.”

The Doctor finally understood the TARDIS’ strange behaviour. “That’s why the old girl took us to visit some of my friends.”

“I’m pretty sure she mostly wanted me to know all of your embarrassing stories,” Rose teased.

oOoOoOoOo

After breakfast the next morning, Will escorted the Doctor, Rose, and Martha back to the Globe. “Dressing rooms are that way,” he said, pointing to the backstage area, “and the props store is just beyond them.” He turned to Martha. “Will you keep me company while they look for copies of the play?”

Rose suppressed a smile and nodded when Martha looked at her uncertainly. Martha then allowed herself to be led to a bench.

“First time out, and Martha’s already made a conquest,” the Doctor murmured as they walked away. “I should have known Shakespeare would be an incorrigible flirt.”

Rose pushed open the door to the first dressing room and they did a quick search through the drawers and cupboards before moving on. “How come you’re not warning her of the paradox she could cause if she stayed with him?” Rose asked, remembering the stern lecture her first Doctor had given her in Kyoto, when the emperor’s son had tried to court her.

The Doctor peered behind a dressing table in the next dressing room. “One, the emperor’s son was serious. Will is just playing. B—no, two—thirteenth century Japan had almost no contact with the
western world. It would have caused a paradox for the next Empress to be English. And three…” He looked up at her. “You know what the third reason is.”

She did. The Doctor's obvious jealousy had thrilled the 20-year-old Rose, who was desperately in love with the Time Lord and unsure of where their relationship stood. They'd been dancing around their feelings at the time, and any sign of interest had been more than welcome.

In the props room, Rose poked around in a cupboard and pulled out a skull. “Look familiar, Doctor?”

He glanced at it and grinned. “A Sycorax!” An odd expression crossed his face. “Let’s take that and show Will,” he suggested. “Along with this.” He held up the stiff lace ruff he’d found and Rose started laughing.

“Here, put it on,” she urged him, helping him tie the ribbon in the back. When it was fastened, she stepped back to take in the look. “Oh, very dashing Doctor—in a sixteenth century way.”

She brushed off her jeans and look around the room. “I think the play is completely gone.”

“Agreed. Let’s go tell Will he doesn’t have anything to worry about.”

They reached the stage in time to hear Will say, “Are the rules of love really so strict in the land of Freedonia, where women can be whatever they like?”

He leaned in for a kiss, but Martha pulled back. “I don’t know how to tell you this, oh great genius, but your breath doesn’t half stink.”

“Good props store back there,” the Doctor said, interrupting the conversation. He looked down at the skull in his hand. “I'm not sure about this though. Reminds me of a Sycorax.”

A contemplative look crossed Will’s face. “Sycorax.” Will leaned back and nodded. “Nice word. I’ll have that off you as well.”

“I should be on ten percent,” the Doctor said, satisfied that Will would remember the name in a few years when he wrote The Tempest. “How’s your head?”

A pinched expression crossed Will’s face. “Still aching.”

“Here, I got you this.” The Doctor took the ruff off and put it around Will’s neck. “Neck brace. Wear that for a few days till it’s better, although… you might want to keep it. It suits you.”

Martha grinned and touched the ruff. “What about the play?” she asked.

The Doctor stuck his hands in his coat pockets. “Gone. I looked all over. Every single copy of Love’s Labour’s Won went up in the sky.”

“My lost masterpiece,” Will said regretfully, and it was amazing how much more he looked like Shakespeare with the ruffled collar.

“You could write it up again,” Martha suggested.

The Doctor and Rose exchanged a glance, then Rose shook her head. “Better not, Will,” she said. “Even if you rewrote the last scene, the whole play was the Carrionites’ tool. Probably better it if stays lost.”

“Oh, but I’ve got new ideas,” Will said, his eyes lighting up. “Perhaps it’s time I wrote about fathers
and sons, in memory of my boy, my precious Hamnet.”

“Hamnet?” Martha repeated.

Will nodded. “That’s him,” he said quietly.

“Hamnet?” she questioned again, emphasising the last syllable.

Will looked at her through narrowed eyes. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Anyway,” the Doctor said, breaking into the conversation before Martha could accidentally tell Will what he ended up naming the play, “time we were off.” He leaned over and picked up the crystal ball. “I’ll chuck this lot into the attic, and then I’ve got to take Martha back to Freedonia.”

“You mean travel on through time and space,” Will said with a half smile.

“You what?” the Doctor asked, dumbfounded.

“You’re from another world like the Carrionites, and Martha is from the future. It’s not hard to work out.” He looked at Rose. “In fact, you’re the hardest one to place. You’re not of this time, like Martha, and though I feel like you are from this world, you seem more like your husband than any of us.”

“That’s… incredible,” the Doctor said. “You are incredible.”

“We’re alike in many ways, Doctor.” He turned back to Martha and took her hand. “Martha, let me say goodbye to you in a new verse. A sonnet for my Dark Lady.”

All three time travellers started a little at that familiar phrase, and even more when he recited the opening lines of one of his more famous sonnets.

“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.”

Before he could get any further, Burbage and Kempe rushed into the theatre, panting for breath. “Will!” Burbage exclaimed.

“Will, you’ll never believe it,” Kempe said. “She’s here! She’s turned up!”

Burbage took over again. “We’re the talk of the town. She heard about last night. She wants us to perform it again.”

“The Queen?” Rose asked.

Burbage grinned. “Yes! She’s here.”

Fanfare played in the courtyard, and Rose craned her neck, trying to get a glimpse of the famous royal. She’d always loved Queen Elizabeth the First. The woman who entered the theatre was older than she’d expected, but she remembered after a moment that 1599 was near the end of her life.

“Queen Elizabeth the First!” the Doctor exclaimed.

“Doctor?” she said in disbelief.

“What?”


“Off with their heads!”

“What?” he said a third time, indignant now.

“Oh, never mind what, just run!” Martha said. “See you, Will, and thanks.”

They exited the theatre through the stage entrance and ran down the street towards the TARDIS. Heavy footsteps sounded behind them, and a guard called out, “Stop in the name of the Queen!”

Instead, they put on more speed. “What have you done to upset her?” Martha demanded.

“How should we know?” the Doctor said, turning to look behind them while Rose ran ahead to unlock the door. “Haven’t even met her yet. That’s time travel for you. Still, can’t wait to find out.”

Rose had the door open when the Doctor and Martha reached the TARDIS, and Martha ran down the ramp. She rolled her eyes when the Doctor stopped and looked back at the guards. “That’s something to look forward to,” he said enthusiastically, then shut the door suddenly. Rose heard something thwack into the wood as she hit the dematerialisation sequence that would take them into the Vortex.

“So, have you managed to alienate all of Britain’s ruling queens?” Rose asked. “Only, that’s two out of six and I’d just like to know if we’re going to be in trouble if we ever meet Liz II.”

The Doctor tossed his coat over a strut, then joined Rose at the console. “Nah…” He scratched at the back of his neck. “And I’d like to point out, Rose Tyler, that I didn’t start getting on the bad side of your queens until you were travelling with me.”

Rose pressed her lips together to hide a smirk, then caught the confused look on Martha’s face. “Oh, we were banished by Queen Victoria once, that’s all,” she explained.

“Right.” Martha looked at them and said, “So, I guess it’s home then?”

“Well,” the Doctor said, stretching the word out, “we were thinking… the TARDIS does travel through time and space.” Martha’s eyes widened. “Would you like to see another planet before going home?”

“No complaints from me,” she said with a laugh.

“How about one of our favourite planets, Rose?” the Doctor asked as he put in the coordinates. “Year five billion and fifty-three, planet New Earth. Second hope of humankind.”

“Apple grass,” Rose said nostalgically.

_I nearly kissed you, when we were stretched out on my coat looking up at the sky._

She smiled; little revelations like that into the months before their relationship changed always made her feel warm and loved.

“So? Are you ready, ladies?”

Rose looked at Martha, too excited to make any sort of protest, and made a quick decision. “Shower and a change of clothes first,” she said firmly, knowing it was the right choice when she saw the look
of relief on Martha’s face. “Elizabethan England has a lot to recommend it, but its standards for personal hygiene aren’t quite what I’m used to.”

“You can say that again,” Martha said fervently. She looked down at herself. “Only, I don’t have anything else to wear.”

“That’s easily solved,” Rose said. “Just wait until you see the wardrobe room, Martha Jones.”
Martha makes her first trip off-world. Predictably, it does not go as planned.

Thank you for the birthday wishes, everyone!

Martha was practically vibrating with excitement when she walked with Rose back to the console room an hour after they’d left Shakespeare and an irate Elizabeth the First. The TARDIS’ wardrobe room had stunned her into silence, but once she got past its immensity, Rose had shown her to a section with clothes that matched her own style, and she’d quickly chosen a new outfit.

“Ready?” the Doctor asked when they’d joined him. “Here we go then!” He danced around the console, making sure he’d entered the coordinates correctly and then pulling the lever. “Fifty thousand light years from your old world, and we’re slap bang in the middle of New New York.”


The adoration in the Doctor’s eyes made Martha blush, and she looked away when he leaned down to kiss his wife. When she looked up again, he was putting his coat on and smiling at Rose with his Rose-smile. One of his Rose-smiles, she amended, already aware he had several he reserved just for her.

“Absolutely correct, Rose. It’s the fifteenth version of New York since the original, and one of the most dazzling cities ever built.”

Rose opened the door, and they walked out of the TARDIS into a drenching rain. “Oh, that’s nice,” Martha said, reaching for the zip on her coat while Rose turned her collar up. “Time Lord version of dazzling.”

“Nah, bit of rain never hurt anyone,” the Doctor protested. “Come on, let’s get under cover!”

They dodged the raindrops as best they could, darting through the alley, searching for cover. “Well, it looks like the same old Earth to me,” Martha said, “on a Wednesday afternoon.” She caught sight of washing hanging out to dry, and felt a moment of sympathy for whoever it belonged to.

“Hold on, hold on.” The Doctor jogged over to an awning that protected a computer terminal. “Let’s have a look.”

Water dripped down Martha’s neck and under the collar of her jacket while she watched the Doctor point his sonic screwdriver at the terminal and pound on it a few times. The lines of static resolved
into a female news anchor.

“And the driving should be clear and easy, with fifteen extra lanes open for the New New Jersey expressway.”

The picture changed to flying cars soaring away from a futuristic city, and Rose tapped the screen. “Oh, there’s the New New York I remember! Wonder where we are, then?”

“This must be the lower levels,” the Doctor said, then ducked his head down and peered up at the grungy buildings. “Down in the base of the tower. Some sort of under-city.”

Martha stared at the flying cars, even less impressed with their current locale now that she knew what she was missing. “You’ve brought me to the slums?” she asked, not bothering to hide the distaste in her voice.

“Much more interesting. It’s all cocktails and glitter up there,” he insisted, pointing at the image on the screen. “This is the real city.”

Rose laughed, and even Martha couldn’t help but smile at his enthusiasm. His hair was plastered to his face, his suit was soaked through, but he still beamed like a kid in a candy store.

“You’d enjoy anything,” Martha told him.

“That’s me.” The sound of rain slowed, and he smiled widely. “Ah, the rain’s stopping. Better and better.”

He stepped back out into the alley and Rose and Martha followed. “You mentioned apple grass before,” Martha said to Rose. “So last time, you were up there, weren’t you?”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t exactly a picnic,” Rose said, and Martha flushed when she realised how easily the other woman had sussed out her discontent. “We went to see this friend who was in hospital, only when we got there, we discovered these cat nuns were… well, long story short, we stopped them, but not before I got possessed by a piece of skin with an attitude.”

Martha shook her head. “I’m not even going to ask.”

The Doctor clenched his jaw at the memory of Cassandra. Rose reached for his hand, but before she could say anything, a weathered green stall in front of them opened up.

“Ah! You should have said,” the owner told them. “How long you been there? Happy. You want Happy.”

He ducked down below his counter, and more stalls opened up and down the alley, filling the air with a cacophony of vendors trying to sell their wares. The three travellers turned around slowly, taking it all in.

“Customers! Customers! We’ve got customers!”

“We’re in business.”

“Mother, open up the Mellow!”

“Happy, Happy, lovely happy Happy!”

“Anger. Buy some Anger!”
“Get some Mellow. Makes you feel all bendy and soft all day long.”

“Don’t go to them,” the first man said. “They’ll rip you off. Do you want some Happy?”

“No thanks,” Rose told him.

“Are they selling drugs?” Martha asked.

“I think they’re selling moods,” the Doctor said, listening to the sales pitches still going on.

“Same thing, isn’t it?” Martha said, and he had to admit she had a point.

Locals started to wander in, none of them looking like they were taking Happy. Dressed in rags, they trudged through the alley with no hope in their eyes.

“Over here, sweetheart!” one of the vendors called out to a young woman dressed in grey with a scarf wrapped around her head. “That's it, come on, I'll get you first!” she said.

She shuffled towards the stall, and the seller lowered her voice to a soft, soothing tone. “Come over here, yeah. And what can I get you, my love?”

“I want to buy Forget,” said the woman, her voice barely above a whisper.

“I've got Forget, my darling. What strength? How much do you want forgetting?”

The Doctor slowly walked closer, feeling like there was something deeply wrong with this exchange.

“It’s my mother and father.” She paused for a moment and swallowed. “They went on the motorway.”

“Oh, that’s a swine,” the seller cooed, then handed the customer a patch. “Try this. Forget Forty-three. That’s two credits.”

“Sorry, but hold on a minute,” the Doctor said, putting a hand on the customer’s shoulder. She turned around. “What happened to your parents?” he asked

She glanced down at the street. “They drove off.”

The bleak look in her eyes didn’t make any sense. “Yeah, but they might drive back.”

She gave him a look that said he was impossibly naive. “Everyone goes to the motorway in the end. I’ve lost them.”

“But they can’t have gone far. You could find them.”

She sighed, then shook her head as if he couldn’t understand, and moved her collar and raised her hand to her neck.

“No. No, no, don’t.”

She placed the patch on her neck and drew in a deep breath. The grief seemed to melt off of her, and when she looked at the Doctor again, her eyes were clear and bright. “I’m sorry, what were you saying?”

The Doctor studied her. “Your parents.” She looked at him blankly, almost as if she didn’t know
what the word meant. “Your mother and father. They’re on the motorway.”

“Are they?” She smiled vacantly and shrugged. “That’s nice. I’m sorry, I won’t keep you.”

The Doctor turned to watch her walk away. He had a feeling the TARDIS had brought them to the under-city on purpose.

“So that’s the human race five billion years in the future,” Martha said in disgust. “Off their heads on chemicals.”

Doctor!

He spun around at Rose’s cry. A man had her in a chokehold and was pointing a gun at her head. and his partner stepped in front of them, holding a gun on the Doctor.

“Let her go!” the Doctor growled. Heedless of the weapon, he lunged forward and grabbed at Rose’s hand, but the man shifted back a few steps and the woman moved directly between them.

“I’m sorry,” the man said, slowly shuffling backwards away from the Doctor, pulling Rose along with him. “I’m really, really sorry. We just need three; that’s all.”

The Doctor reached for Rose again, but stopped when the woman waved her gun wildly—there was no telling where a bullet would go if she fired the weapon right now, and he wouldn’t risk Rose getting hurt.

His hands clenched into fists at his sides. “I’m warning you, let her go!”

The power of the Oncoming Storm seeped into his voice, and fear flickered in the kidnappers’ eyes. But instead of obeying his command, they slowly backed up towards a door.

The Doctor took a deep breath. “I don’t know who you are or what you want, but if you take her, I will find you—no matter where you go in the universe, I will find you, and I will get her back. Now let her go.” Instead, the man stepped through the open doorway with Rose.

“I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. Sorry,” the woman said before she slammed the door in the Doctor’s face.

Rose struggled against the man’s hold while the woman locked the door. She shook her head.

“That’s not gonna keep the Doctor out for very long,” she told the pair.

They dragged her through a covered alley, and Rose dug in her heels and squirmed as much as possible, trying to give the Doctor time to reach her.

Rose could feel the Doctor’s anger over their bond, and for once, she didn’t try to calm him down. She knew when he got the door open because he was suddenly coming towards her at a fast pace. Rose fought even harder against being forced down a staircase, hoping to give him time to catch up.

They stopped in front of a vehicle that looked like a tram car, and Rose’s heart rate increased. She couldn’t let them get her into the car. “You don’t know it yet,” she said, tugging even harder against the man’s hold, “but you’re having a really bad day.”

She finally got free of his chokehold and started to run, but she’d only gone two steps when he grabbed onto her hand and jerked her back.

Rose glared at him. “I’m the last person in the world you should have chosen to kidnap, because
there’s nothing that man won’t do to get me back.”

The couple looked completely spooked, clearly remembering the rage on the Doctor’s face when he’d tried to stop them.

“Give her some Sleep,” the man ordered, pulling her head back to expose her neck.

“Don’t you dare,” Rose said, panicking at the thought of unknown pharmaceuticals in her new, not-quite-human body.

The woman reached into her pocket and pulled out a patch. “It’s just Sleep Fourteen.”

“Get that thing away from me,” Rose shouted, squirming as the woman’s hand got closer to her neck.

“No, baby, don’t fight it.”

Rose shivered when the patch touched her neck. Her mind remained conscious and alert, but it felt like her body was trapped in treacle, unable to move.

But she could call for help. Doctor! They put one of those patches on me so I couldn’t fight.

“Get on board,” the man said, pushing her along.

The door at the top of the landing burst open, hitting the wall with a clang. Rose met the Doctor’s frantic gaze as the couple dragged her into the car, and even when the car door shut, she hung onto the hope that maybe he’d be able to get the door unlocked before they started moving.

They laid her down on a bunk in the back of the car, and the woman watched her while the man took the driver’s seat. Rose heard him flipping switches, and knew he was starting the car.

“Engaging anti-gravs,” the man said, dashing her hopes of an easy rescue. “Hold on.” He released the brake, and she felt the car lift off the ground.

She quickly blinked back a tear of frustration that the Doctor hadn’t gotten there just a few seconds earlier.

I’m sorry, love.

The words gave voice to his guilt, and she sighed. This isn’t your fault, Doctor. I know you’ll find me.

I will. I’m coming for you, Rose.

His vow made her feel better, and she focused on her body, testing her appendages, trying to get movement back. The woman bent down over her, obviously intent on giving her a quick look-over, and Rose glared at her balefully.

The woman’s eyes widened and she took a half step back. “I don’t think the patch is working on her,” she told her partner. She looked at Rose in fearful amazement and moved up to sit in front.

“Anyway, she’s breathing, pulse is fine, and no harm done. She looks rich.” Rose almost laughed at the thought. “She must have got lost.”

You could say that, yeah. With some effort, Rose was able to shift her head just enough to see her kidnappers.
“Yeah, well, she’s worth her weight in gold to us.” The man picked up the radio. “This is car four six five diamond six. We have three passengers, repeat three. Request access to the fast lane.”

The radio crackled and then a computerised voice said, “Access granted.”

“Oh, yes.”

While the couple kissed, Rose started slowly moving her arms and legs, pulling the patch off as soon as she could. Once it was removed, the drug quickly worked its way out of her system, and she slid out of the bunk and looked at her kidnappers.

“Okay, why don’t you tell me who you are, and why you kidnapped me?”

The Doctor’s fury focused his senses, and he could see everything even more clearly than he usually could as he raced after Rose.

He didn’t hesitate when he reached intersections, following the tug of the bond. When she panicked and let him see a picture of the car they’d stopped in front of, he found an extra reserve of energy and ran even faster. If they got her into that car, it would take far longer for him to rescue her.

As he turned yet another corner, she cried out for him again. His anger swelled into rage when he heard the fear in her voice, and his field of vision narrowed until all he could see was the doorway at the end of the alley.

Rose’s presence felt clouded, and she said, They put one of those patches on me so I couldn’t fight.

The Doctor threw through the door open and stepped onto a metal staircase just in time to catch Rose’s eyes before the car door shut. He put his hands on the railings and slid down, then whipped out his sonic and ran for the car.

But the engines started before he could open the door, and he stepped back when it lifted up off the ground. “Rose!” he shouted at the top of his lungs.

Her frustration answered his anger, and the Doctor ran a hand through his hair, yanking on it hard enough to hurt. I'm sorry, love.

He could almost see Rose shaking her head. This isn’t your fault, Doctor. I know you’ll find me.

Her confidence bolstered his own. I will. I’m coming for you, Rose.

Martha reached the staircase just as the Doctor turned around to retrace his steps. “What happened? Where’s Rose?”

“Gone.” The Doctor pushed past her, retracing his steps to the alley of drug dealers.

She jogged to keep up with him. “Well, what are we going to do?”

“Get her back.”

“I’d worked that much out for myself, thanks.”

The Doctor stopped and took a deep breath. “Martha, my wife was just taken from me for totally unknown reasons. Could you be quiet and let me think?”
He didn’t care if it was rude; sometimes rudeness served a purpose. Martha was quiet the rest of the way back, letting him formulate a plan to rescue Rose. Finding her wouldn’t be the hard part; he could track her unerringly no matter where on the planet they took her. Even if they took her off-world, he would know immediately and be able to follow before he lost the ability to sense where she was.

Getting to her was another thing. There wasn’t enough room inside that car to land the TARDIS in it, even if he could get a lock on the proper coordinates. He needed a car, but first he needed to know where they’d taken her and why.

The stalls had all closed up, and the Doctor pounded on the closest one. The woman who’d sold Forget earlier opened up and smiled at him. “Thought you’d come back. Do you want some happy Happy?”

The Doctor breathed through his nose, his temper very nearly getting the better of him. “Those people, who were they? Where did they take my wife?”

“They’ve taken her to the motorway,” said the man who’d first offered them Happy.

The Doctor spun around and glared at the drug dealers, who explained what had happened one by one.

“Looked like carjackers to me.”

“I’d give up now, darling.”

The Doctor’s lips curled in a snarl. “Let me make one thing abundantly clear. I will never give up on Rose Tyler.”

The vendors were silent for a moment, then the lone man spoke up again. “Used to be thriving, this place. You couldn’t move.” He shrugged. “But they all go to the motorway in the end.”

“He kept on saying three, we need three. What did he mean, three?”

The first woman he’d spoken to answered, and he turned back around to face her. “It’s the car-sharing policy, to save fuel. You get special access if you’re carrying three adults.”

The Doctor shoved his hand through his hair. Of course the kidnapping had been totally random. His jeopardy-friendly Rose—she’d simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“This motorway. How do I get there?”

The woman nodded towards her right. “Straight down the alley, keep going to the end. You canna miss it.” The Doctor took two steps, then she called out, “Tell you what. How about some happy Happy? Then you’ll be smiling, my love.”

He spun back around, his temper finally at its limit. “Do you really think I’ll let you drug me into forgetting Rose has been kidnapped?” he growled. The woman recoiled and the Doctor felt the muscle in his jaw twitch as he fought for just a bit of control over his anger. “Word of advice, all of you,” he said after a moment, his voice raw and guttural. “Cash up, close down, and pack your bags.”

Her smile faded. “Why’s that, then?”

“Because as soon as I’ve found her, alive and well—and I will find her alive and well—then I’m
coming back, and this street is closing. Tonight!”

The woman gaped at her. “Sleep 14 shouldn’t have worn off that quickly. Even if you were waking up, it still should have been…”

“Superior biology.” Rose said, making a note to tell the Doctor she’d finally gotten to use his quip. “Now that I’m awake, why don’t you turn around and take me back to my husband?”

The woman shook her head regretfully. “We can’t; I’m sorry. We’re already on the motorway.”

The Doctor’s anger washed over Rose, strong enough that she felt her own body starting to react to the emotion. She drew in a breath; this was the first time since they’d bonded that either of them had experienced such a strong negative emotion.

When she had her emotions under control, she looked at the couple. “Well, if I’m going to be stuck here with you until the Doctor finds me, can I at least know your names?”

“I’m Cheen,” the woman said, then nodded to her partner, “and this is Milo. What’s your name?”

“Rose Tyler.”

“I swear we’re sorry, Rose. We’re really, really sorry. We just needed access to the fast lane, but I promise, as soon as we arrive, we’ll drop you off and you can go back and find your husband.”

Rose raised an eyebrow. “Yeah?” Something didn’t seem right about that.

“I swear! Look.” Cheen moved her hair away from her neck, revealing a patch. “Honesty.”

“Is this how people entertain themselves on New Earth then?” Rose asked, her anger getting the better of her again. “Kidnap a perfect stranger, force them into your car, then drop them off a few miles down the road?”

“We’ve got to get to where the air is cleaner,” Cheen said defensively. Her eyes went slightly out of focus. “The view from the windows… You can see all the way out to the flatlands. Clear blue sky. They say the air smells like apple grass. Can you imagine?”

“Actually, yeah I can,” Rose said, not swayed by this emotional appeal. “I’ve walked on it. With the Doctor!”

Cheen pressed her lips together and looked up at the roof of the car. Rose sighed. “So, clean air. This is exhaust then?” she asked, nodding out the window.

Milo nodded. “We’re going out to Brooklyn. We couldn’t stay in Pharmacy Town, because…”

His voice trailed off and he patted Cheen’s knee. From the way the couple looked at each other, Rose suddenly knew what they were going to say.

“Well, because of me,” Cheen said, wearing a goofy smile that matched Milo’s. “I’m pregnant. We only discovered it last week.” She laughed like she still couldn’t believe it. “Scan says it’s going to be a boy.”

Rose raised an eyebrow. “You’re pregnant, and you’re wearing one of those patches? Has anyone ever done tests to see if they’re safe for babies?” The couple exchanged an uneasy look, and Rose huffed out a breath of air. “Look, you know loads of things aren’t safe when you’re pregnant. That’s
why you’re moving, yeah?”

Cheen bit her lip, then took the patch off.

“This’ll be as fast as we can,” Milo said soothingly. “We’ll take the motorway to the Brooklyn flyover, and then after that it’s going to take a while, because then there’s no fast lane, just ordinary roads, but at least it’s direct.”

“It’s only ten miles,” Cheen added.

Something didn’t add up. Why did they need to kidnap someone to go ten miles? “How long is it going to take?” she asked, afraid of the answer.

“About six years,” Cheen said happily.

Rose tried to control her reaction, knowing the Doctor was already on edge, but that was worse than she’d expected. “What?”

Cheen rubbed her still-flat belly. “Be just in time for him to start school.”

“It’s going to take us six years to go ten miles.” Milo and Cheen both nodded, neither of them looking like this was unreasonable, or just flat-out ridiculous. “How come?”

At the end of the alley he’d been pointed towards, the Doctor found a large metal door with a faded sign reading, “Motorway access.” Martha crossed her arms and looked up and down the alley uneasily as he sonicked the lock.

He put his hand on the door, then paused. “Martha, I should have thought,” he said. “This will probably be dangerous. I have no idea what I’m going to find. If you’d like to go back to the TARDIS…”

She shook her head. “You’re not getting rid of me that easily,” she said, and he admired her courage. “Open the door so we can find Rose.”

The Doctor smiled for the first time since Rose had been taken, and turned the handle. The door opened onto a small platform just off a motorway chockablock with cars in all directions, as far as the eye could see.

Exhaust fumes hung heavily in the air, and the Doctor and Martha were both coughing in seconds. Martha pulled the collar of her jacket up over her nose, but the Doctor just put his hand over his mouth and engaged his respiratory bypass as he tried to figure out what to do next.

Serendipitously, the car door directly in front of them slid open, and someone in a bomber jacket, flying goggles, and a scarf called out to them in an Irish accent. “Hey! You daft little street struts. What are you doing standing there?” He moved away from the door and waved them into the car. “Either get out or get in. Come on!”

The Doctor ran down to the end of the platform and climbed into the car, Martha right behind him. Once inside, they coughed violently, trying to expel the fumes from their lungs.

“Did you ever see the like?” their rescuer exclaimed.

“Here you go.” A dark haired woman held up an oxygen mask, and the Doctor pointed to Martha.
The man removed his scarf and the Doctor realised he was catkind, with an orange tabby pattern marking his face. “Just standing there, breathing it in.” He shook his head, then turned to the woman. “There’s this story,” he said, “says back in the old days, on junction forty-seven, this woman stood in the exhaust fumes for a solid twenty minutes. By the time they found her, her head had swollen to fifty feet.”

“Oh, you’re making it up,” the woman said.

He sat down in the driver’s seat and looked over at her. “A fifty foot head! Just think of it. Imagine picking that nose.”

Martha wrinkled her nose, and clearly, their hostess agreed with her. “Oh, stop it,” the woman ordered. “That’s disgusting.”

“What, did you never pick your nose?”

She tapped him on the shoulder. “Bran, we’re moving.”

Martha offered the Doctor the mask. He took it gratefully and sucked in lungfuls of pure oxygen as his body filtered out the contaminants he’d inhaled.

“Right. I’m there. I’m on it.” Bran put the car into gear, and every other car in a one hundred fifty yard radius started to move at the same time, honking and sending more exhaust into the air.

The Doctor handed the mask back to Martha and peered out the window, needing to watch their progress as he got closer to Rose. But they barely moved at all before they stopped again.

Bran shifted into neutral and leaned back in his seat. “Twenty yards. We’re having a good day.” He looked at the Doctor and Martha over his shoulder. “And who might you be? Very well-dressed for hitchhikers.”

“Sorry, I’m the Doctor, and this is Martha Jones.”

“Medical man! My name’s Thomas Kincade Brannigan, and this is the bane of my life, the lovely Valerie.”

Valerie smiled at the Doctor. “Nice to meet you.”

Brannigan nodded towards the back of the car. “And that’s the rest of the family behind you.”

The Doctor pulled back a curtain and found a basketful of kittens. “Ah, that’s nice,” he said softly, picking one up. “Hello.”

Martha reached down and petted the closest one. “How old are they?”

Valerie stroked her kitten’s forehead. “Just two months.”

“Poor little souls. They’ve never known the ground beneath their paws.” The Doctor looked at Brannigan incomprehendingly, and he elaborated. “Children of the motorway.”

The Doctor and Martha exchanged a look. “You mean they were born in here?” Martha asked incredulously.

“We couldn’t stop,” Valerie explained. “We heard there were jobs going, out in the laundries on Fire Island. Thought we’d take a chance.”
“What, you’ve been driving for two months?” the Doctor asked.

Brannigan snorted. “Do I look like a teenager? We’ve been driving for twelve years now.”

His hearts stopped. “I’m sorry?”

“Yeah!” he said. “Started out as newlyweds. Feels like yesterday,” he cooed to Valerie.

“Feels like twelve years to me,” she said dryly.

Brannigan smiled roguishly and tickled Valerie’s ribs. “Ah, sweetheart, but you still love me.”

“Twelve years?” Martha repeated.

“How far did you come?” the Doctor asked. “Where did you start?”

“Battery Park. It’s five miles back.”

“You travelled five miles in twelve years?” A ripple of uneasy surprise spread both ways over the bond, and the Doctor had a feeling Rose had just learned the same thing.

“I think he’s a bit slow,” Brannigan told Valerie.

“Where are you from?” Valerie asked them.

The Doctor put the kitten back in the basket. “Never mind that. I’ve got to get out. My wife’s in one of these cars. She was taken hostage. I should get back to the TARDIS.”

He opened the door, coughing as the exhaust fumes poured into the car. Looking behind them, he realised the truth as Brannigan said it.

“You’re too late for that. We’ve passed the lay-by. You’re a passenger now, Sonny Jim.”

The Doctor slid the door closed and looked through the windscreen at the traffic jam. “When’s the next lay-by?”

“Oh, six months?”

Milo and Cheen had tried to explain traffic on the motorway, but Rose quickly figured out they didn’t known much more than she did. She rubbed her fingers over her temples as she looked around at the packed road.

They dropped past several layers of vehicles, but the traffic never seemed to stop. “How many cars are out there?”

“I don’t think anyone knows. Here we go.” Cheen offered her some food. “Hungry?”

Rose, my rescue plans have hit a snag.

She thanked Cheen for the food, then replied to the Doctor. Tell me about it. Milo and Cheen have promised to let me go in six years.

She felt his vehement denial at that. I won’t make you wait that long. I swear, Rose—I’ll find you before then.
The bands around Rose’s lungs eased a little. She’d known the Doctor would never let Cheen and Milo keep her for six years, but it was good to hear him say it.

Needing some kind of contact with him, she reached out and ran a light touch over the bond, imagining that she was running her hand through his hair.

*I know, my Doctor.*

She felt the briefest sensation of a kiss being pressed to her temple, and then the bond settled into the background of her mind as he focused on finding a way back to her.

Rose closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then looked at Milo and asked, “How far down is it to this fast lane?”

“Oh, it’s right at the bottom, underneath the traffic jam,” he said, steering them in between rows of cars. “But not many people can afford three passengers, so it’s empty down there. Rumour has it you can reach up to thirty miles per hour.”

Rose rubbed at her forehead. “Impressive,” she muttered. She looked around at the back of the car. “So how are you going to live in here for the next six years?”

“Oh, we stocked up.” Cheen turned around in her seat and started pointing out supplies. “Got self-replicating fuel, muscle stimulants for exercise, and there’s a chemical toilet at the back. And all waste products are recycled as food.”

“Oh.” Rose wouldn’t throw the food away, not knowing when she’d get anything else, but she stuck it in her pocket to be eaten only when she was famished.

“Oh, another gap. This is brilliant,” Milo exclaimed.

“Car sign in,” the computer requested.

“Car Four Six Five Diamond Six, on descent to fast lane, thank you very much.”

“Please drive safely.”

The Doctor went numb for a moment. Trapped in a car without Rose and no obvious way out for six months.

Reluctantly, he reached out for her, taking what comfort he could in their bond. *Rose, my rescue plans have hit a snag.*

He felt her sigh. *Tell me about it. Milo and Cheen have promised to let me go in six years.*

Every muscle in the Doctor’s body stiffened and he had to press his lips together to withhold a vehement denial. Six months would be difficult enough; he would not leave her trapped in that tiny car with her kidnappers for six years.

*I won’t make you wait that long. I swear, Rose—I’ll find you before then.*

He held his breath, hoping the promise would be enough for Rose. A moment later, he felt her hand card through his hair and he had to press his lips together to hold back a sigh.

*I know, my Doctor.*
He returned her telepathic caress with a soft kiss, and then, as much as he hated to do it, he pulled back from their connection so he could focus on finding her.

The Doctor looked around the car, searching for a way to contact the outside world. If Brannigan and Valerie had been on the motorway for twelve years and still hadn’t reached their destination, the Doctor would need other help to get to Rose. Without asking, he pointed the sonic at the screen of the onboard communication system, dialling the New Earth version of 999.

The police department logo appeared on the screen, and he spoke into the radio. “I need to talk to the police.”

“Thank you for your call,” the automated system said. “You have been placed on hold.”

He rested his forehead against the side of the car. “But you’re the police.”

“Thank you for your call. You have been placed on hold.”

He dropped the radio and turned back to his hosts, nearly hitting the mobile hanging from the ceiling. “Is there anyone else? I once met the Duke of Manhattan. Is there any way of getting through to him?”

Brannigan and Valerie shared a look. “Oh now, ain’t you lordly?” he said.

The Doctor raked his hands through his hair. “I’ve got to find Rose.”

“You can’t make outside calls.” Valerie put a gentle hand on his wrist and pulled his hand away from his head. “The motorway’s completely enclosed.”

“What about the other cars?” Martha suggested, just seconds before the Doctor was going to ask the same thing.

Brannigan nodded. “Oh, we’ve got contact with them, yeah. Well, some of them, anyway. They’ve got to be on your friends list.” He turned around and looked at the screen on the control panel that listed nearby cars. “Now, let’s see. Who’s nearby? Ah, the Cassini sisters!”

He tapped their car number, and a picture of two older women popped up on the screen. “Still your hearts, my handsome girls,” he said into the radio. “It’s Brannigan here.”

“Get off the line, Brannigan,” a woman ordered. “You’re a pest and a menace.”

“Oh, come on, now, sisters,” Brannigan wheedled. “Is that any way to talk to an old friend?”

“You know full well we’re not sisters,” she retorted. “We’re married.”

Brannigan leaned back in his seat. “Ooo, stop that modern talk. I’m an old-fashioned cat. Now, I’ve got a hitchhiker here, calls himself the Doctor.”

The Doctor bent over the front seats and took the radio from Brannigan. “Hello. Sorry. I’m looking for someone called Rose Tyler. She’s been carjacked. She’s inside one of these vehicles, but I don’t know which one.”

“Wait a minute,” a second voice requested. “Could I ask, what entrance did they use?”

The Doctor held his finger off the button and looked down at Brannigan. “Where were we?”

“Pharmacy Town.”
“Pharmacy Town, about twenty minutes ago,” the Doctor told them.

“Let’s have a look.”

“Just my luck to marry a car-spotter,” the first woman said, and the Doctor felt a pang at the indulgent exasperation in her voice. It was a tone he knew very well; these two women were clearly married, no matter what Brannigan thought about that.

“In the last half hour, fifty-three new cars joined from the Pharmacy Town junction.”

The Doctor rested his forehead on the hand holding the radio for a moment, then asked. “Anything more specific?”

“All in good time,” she chided. “Was she carjacked by two people?”

His hearts leapt. Of course that detail would matter. “Yes, she was, yeah.”

“There we are. Just one of those cars was destined for the fast lane. That means they had three on board. And the car number is four six five diamond six.”

“That’s it! So how do we find them?”

“Ah,” she said regretfully. “Now there I’m afraid I can’t help.”

The Doctor looked down at Brannigan. “Call them on this thing. We’ve got their number. Diamond six.”

“But not if they’re designated fast lane.” Brannigan shook his head. “It’s a different class.”

“You could try the police,” the woman said over the radio.

The Doctor pinched the bridge of his nose. “They put me on hold.”

“You’ll have to keep trying,” the other Mrs. Cassini told him. “There’s no one else.”

“Thank you.”

Rose watched through the front window as they moved downward through the layers of traffic.

“See?” Milo said, pointing to the screen on the the control panel that showed their movement. “Another ten layers to go. We’re scorching.”

A ominous growl sounded through the motorway, and Rose looked at her companions to see how they were reacting. Milo and Cheen both had nervous looks on their faces that didn’t exactly encourage Rose.

“What’s that?” she asked. They heard the growl again, and she picked up the direction this time. “It’s coming from underneath.”

“It’s that noise, isn’t it?” Cheen asked. “It’s like Kate said. The stories, they’re true.”


Milo rolled his eyes. “It’s the sound of the air vents, that’s all.” He looked at Rose over his shoulder.
“The exhaust fumes travel down, so at the base of the tunnel they’ve got air vents.”

Rose immediately saw a logical flaw in that reasoning: if there were air vents down below, why was the exhaust getting worse instead of better? She kept that thought to herself for the moment though.

“No, but the stories are much better,” Cheen said, apparently forgetting that she’d been worried just a moment ago. She turned around and shot Rose a conspiratorial smile. “They say people go missing on the motorway. Some cars just vanish, never to be seen again, because there’s something living down there in the smoke.” Some of the flippant humour left her voice, and with each word, she sounded more afraid. “Something huge and hungry. And if you get lost on the road, it’s waiting for you.”

There was a long, tense pause, and then Milo broke it. “But like I said. Air vents.” He put the car back in gear. “Going down to the next layer.”

“I hope they’re air vents, Milo, because I didn’t come this far from home to die in a tunnel in a tiny car.” Rose glanced out the window. “But does it look like air vents are working to you?”

“No,” Cheen said, sounding properly frightened now.

The noises from the bottom of the tunnel got louder, and Rose looked over at Milo. “Then what’s down there?”

For a moment, he looked like he was thinking about it, then she watched him shove the fear aside and laugh. “Nah. Kid stuff.” He picked up the radio. “Car four six five diamond six, on descent.”

Rose fought to bring her fear under control. She needed the Doctor to remain level-headed, which meant being as vague with the details as possible. Still, as she stared out the window and watched layers of traffic go by, there was a strong feeling in her gut telling her this was the last thing they should be doing.

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There was an obvious solution no one had suggested yet. “We’ve got to go to the fast lane,” the Doctor said. “Take me down.”

“Not in a million years,” Brannigan said flatly.

“You’ve got three passengers.” Brannigan’s expression didn’t change, so the Doctor tried again. “Mrs. Cassini said there’s no one else, but that’s not true. There’s me,” he said. “I promised Rose I’d get her out.”

“That’s your promise,” Brannigan said. “I’m still not going.”

The Doctor ground his teeth together. “Brannigan, she’s my wife. What would you do if carjackers had taken Valerie?”

Brannigan wasn’t moved by his appeal. “What if our positions were reversed, and I asked you to risk Rose to rescue Valerie?”

“She’d be the first to tell me to do it,” the Doctor said honestly.

“That’s a no,” Valerie said fiercely. “And that’s final. I’m not risking the children down there.”

Risking… “Why not? What’s the risk?” He looked back and forth at the couple, fear growing in the
pit of his stomach. He should have known carjackers were the least of their concerns. “What happens down there?”

She shook her head angrily. “We’re not discussing it. The conversation is closed.”

“So we keep on driving,” Martha said.

Brannigan stared straight out the windscreen, purposely not looking at either of them. “Yes, we do.”

“For how long?” the Doctor demanded, their pigheaded blindness to the truth frustrating him.

“Till the journey’s end.”

The Doctor eyed Brannigan, then picked up the radio. “Mrs. Cassini, this is the Doctor. Tell me, how long have you been driving on the motorway?”

“Oh, we were amongst the first,” she said. “It’s been twenty-three years now.”

“And in all that time, have you ever seen a police car?”

Brannigan and Valerie looked at him, both afraid and shocked that he would voice the unspoken truth.

“I’m not sure,” her wife said hesitantly, but the Doctor heard the note of fear in her voice.

He held Brannigan’s gaze, daring him to say he was wrong. “Look at your notes. Any police?”

“Not as such.”


“I can’t keep a note of everything.” The woman sounded flustered and frightened.

“What if there’s no one out there?” the Doctor suggested darkly.

Brannigan grabbed the radio out of his hand. “Stop it. The Cassinis were doing you a favour.”

The Doctor didn’t back down. He leaned towards Brannigan and whispered furiously. “Someone’s got to ask, because you might not talk about it, but it’s there—in your eyes. What if the traffic jam never stops?”

“Doctor…” Martha said, but he ignored her, focusing on the driver who was refusing to take him to Rose.

Brannigan tried to laugh, but it came out more as a stuttered sigh. “There’s a whole city above us. The mighty city state of New New York. They wouldn’t just leave us.”

“In that case, where are they, hmm? What if there’s no help coming, not ever? What if there’s nothing? Just the motorway, with the cars going round and round and round and round, never stopping. Forever.”

“Shut up!” Valerie ordered. “Just shut up!”

The Doctor blinked at her, realising for the first time that she was just a frightened mother. Before he could say anything to apologise, or to explain, static buzzed over the monitor.
“This is Sally Calypso, and it’s that time again. The sun is blazing high in the sky over the New Atlantic, the perfect setting for the daily contemplation.”

Brannigan took a deep breath. “You think you know us so well, Doctor. But we’re not abandoned. Not while we have each other.”

“This is for all of you out there on the roads,” Sally said. “We’re so sorry. Drive safe.”

An old Earth hymn started playing over the radio waves, and Brannigan and Valerie both joined in. The Doctor looked at them for a moment, and then, to his surprise, he heard a third voice behind him.

Martha had put the kitten down, and she looked at him sympathetically as she sang.

“On a hill, far away, stood an old, rugged cross,
the emblem of suffering and shame.
And I love that old cross, where the dearest and best
for a world of lost sinners was slain.
So I’ll cherish the old rugged cross,
till my trophies at last I lay down.
I will cling to the old rugged cross,
and exchange it some day for a crown.”

In retrospect, Rose realised the daily contemplation shouldn’t have surprised her. No matter where they were, humans tended to band together in difficult times. Clearly, those trapped on the motorway were no different.

She didn’t know the words to the song, but the tune was beautiful and soon she was humming along.

Cheen looked at her when the song ended. “You have a beautiful voice, Rose.”

The computer interrupted Rose’s thank you. “Fast lane access. Please drive safely.”

“We made it,” Milo said. “The fast lane.” He steered the car downward, and despite not wanting to panic the Doctor, Rose couldn’t help but send a plea for him to come quickly.

Chapter End Notes

Remember how I said last week that I love Protective!Doctor? Yeah... this section is good too.
As the last strains of music faded, the Doctor felt Rose’s wordless plea. She needed him, and it was obvious Brannigan and Valerie wouldn’t help.

“If you won’t take me, I’ll go down on my own.” He knelt down over the emergency hatch he’d noticed earlier and started sonicking the seal.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Brannigan asked.

The Doctor looked up at him. “Going after Rose. I thought I’d lost her once, and it nearly drove me mad. I’m going to get her back, even if I have to take the scenic route.”

The door popped open. “Capsule open,” the computer announced.

“But you can’t jump,” Valerie protested.

The Doctor met her gaze. “Rose’s abductors promised to let her go in six years. I’m not waiting that long to get her back.” He smiled wryly. “If it’s any consolation, Valerie, right now, I’m having kittens.”

He looked at Martha. “I can’t take you with me,” he said seriously.

“No, but—”

He shook his head. “Your lungs wouldn’t last five minutes out there. Stay here with Brannigan and Valerie. After I find Rose, we’ll come back for you.”

“Martha will be safe with us, Doctor,” Brannigan said.

A car stopped directly below them, and the Doctor knew this was his best chance to leave. “Here we go.”

Looking down at the exhaust, the Doctor realised his coat would get in the way, so he took it off and handed it to Martha. “Hold onto this,” he told her. “I love that coat. Janis Joplin gave me that coat.”

He took a deep breath of clean air, then engaged his respiratory bypass and lowered himself through the hatch. “Bye then,” he said, and dropped onto the next car.

The roof hatch opened easily with the sonic, and he dropped into a car driven by an albino man wearing a white suit.

“Who the hell are you?” the man asked.

The Doctor took a breath of clean air and said, “Sorry, Motorway Foot Patrol. I’m doing a survey. How are you enjoying your motorway?”

The driver answered while the Doctor opened the floor hatch. “Well, not very much. Junction Five’s been closed for three years.”

“Thank you,” the Doctor said, cutting him off. “Your comments have been noted.” He tucked the sonic back in his pocket and shot a fake smile at the man. “Have a nice day!”

The Doctor had to hang in midair for a few seconds while waiting for a car to stop directly beneath
him. Two Asian girls looked at him in surprise when he dropped into their colourfully decorated car. They stared at him when he offered his cover, neither of them saying a word. The Doctor coughed as he opened the hatch, finding that even with his respiratory bypass engaged, the exhaust was still irritating his throat.

“Thank you for your cooperation. Your comments have been noted.” He spotted a blue bandana and picked it up. “Do you mind if I borrow this?” Without waiting for an answer, he tied it around his face. “Not my colour, but thank you very much.”

The couple in the next car were both nude. “Ooo! Don’t mind me,” the Doctor said, quickly opening the floor hatch without offering any explanation for passing through.

After that, he stopped talking to people and just kept moving. Each layer of cars he passed through brought him closer to Rose.

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In the fast lane, things were going about as well as Rose had expected, which is to say, not very. Milo and Cheen had set in a course for the Brooklyn flyover as soon as they were able, but the turnoff was closed.

“Try again,” said Cheen.

Milo tapped Exit 1 on the monitor, and the computer repeated itself. “Brooklyn turnoff one, closed.”

Sweat beaded up on Cheen’s upper lip. “Try the next one.” Milo obeyed, but Brooklyn turnoff two was also closed. “What do we do?” she asked, her voice high-pitched.

Milo took a deep breath. “We’ll keep going round. We’ll do the whole loop, and by the time we come back round, they’ll be open.”

The same growl they’d heard earlier echoed through the fast lane, the reverberations rattling the car. “Those don’t sound like air vents to me, mate,” Rose said.

“What else could it be?” he said quietly.

A low rumble was followed by another growl, louder this time.

“What the hell is that?” Cheen cried.

“It’s just the hydraulics.” But even Milo knew he was grasping at straws.

Rose shook her head. “Listen, hydraulics don’t sound like that. Whatever’s out there, it’s alive.”

“It’s all exhaust fumes out there. Nothing could breathe in that.”

Before Rose could tell him about all the species who thrived in this kind of gas, a feminine voice came over the airwaves. “Calling car four six five diamond six. Repeat, calling car four six five diamond six.”

Milo picked up the radio. “This is car four six five diamond six. Who’s that? Where are you?”

“I’m in the fast lane, about fifty yards behind. Can you get back up? Can you get off the fast lane?”

Milo frowned. “We only have permission to go down. We need the Brooklyn flyover.”
“It’s closed. Go back up.”

“We can’t.” Milo spoke rapidly. “We’ll just go round.”

“Don’t you understand?” she said loudly. Growls and bangs were transmitted over the radio. “They’re closed. They’re always closed.”

Cheen sobbed and covered her face with her hands. Rose rested a hand on her shoulder, trying to give what comfort she could.

“We’re stuck down here, and there’s something else out there in the fog. Can’t you hear it?”

The growl came over the radio, and a small tremor shook the car. “That’s the air vents,” said Milo. “Jehovah, what are you?” the woman asked incredulously. “Some stupid kid? Get out of here!”

Rose, Cheen, and Milo heard a screech of metal being ripped apart, and the passengers in the other car crying.

Milo’s spine stiffened. “What was that?” Milo asked.

“I can’t move! They’ve got us!”

“But what’s happening?” he asked, gripping the radio tightly.

Rose bent close to the radio. “Can you tell us what it looks like?” she asked, hoping a description would tell the Doctor what they were up against.

“Hang on. It’s here.”

The radio was shaking in Milo’s hand. “Hello?”

“Just drive, you idiots!” she screamed. “Get out of here!”

“Can you hear me? Hello?”

Rose snatched the radio away from Milo. “You heard her, drive! Get us out of here!”

“But where?” Milo asked, wide-eyed.

“I don’t care where, just go fast!” Rose ordered, staring out through the windscreen.

“What is it?” Cheen whimpered. “What’s out there? What is it?”

“Whatever it is,” Rose said, “I don’t fancy hanging around for tea and a chat. Keep moving!” she ordered Milo.

oOoOoOoOo

After too many layers of traffic, the Doctor dropped into the car of a nattily dressed man wearing a bowler hat. “Excuse me, is that legal?” the driver asked.

“Sorry, Motorway Foot Patrol.” The Doctor pulled the scarf off and wiped at his face. “Whatever. Have you got any water?”

“Certainly.” The driver filled a tiny plastic cone from a water cooler and handed it to the Doctor. “Never let it be said I’ve lost my manners.”
The Doctor downed the water in one gulp and looked at his surroundings. “Is this the last layer?” he asked, his voice still hoarse.

The driver nodded. “We’re right at the bottom. Nothing below us but the fast lane.”

*The fast lane!* “Can we drive down?”

The man blinked in confusion. “There’s only two of us. You need three to go down.”

The Doctor tapped the fingers of his right hand against his leg and stared through the windscreen. “Couldn’t we just cheat?” he asked, sick of excuses to not take the fast lane.

“Well, I’d love to, but it’s an automated system.” The driver yanked on the wheel. “The wheel would lock.”

The Doctor grudgingly admitted that was actually a valid reason. Still, if he couldn’t go to the fast lane, he could at least look at what lay between here and there. “Then excuse me.”

“You can’t jump,” the driver said when the Doctor bent over and opened the floor hatch. “It’s a thousand feet down.”

“No, I just want to look.” He opened the hatch and heard a grinding growl. “What’s that noise?”

“I try not to think about it.”

The fear in the man’s voice was the same fear he’d seen on Valerie’s face. There was something at the bottom of the motorway, which meant Rose was in greater danger than he’d thought.

The Doctor peered down into the exhaust fumes, trying to see more. “What are those lights? What’s down there?” Exhaust seeped into the car, and he waved it away with his hand. “I just need to see.” He looked up and spotted the computer. “There must be some sort of ventilation,” he said, striding to it and pointing the sonic at it. “If I could just transmit a pulse through this thing, maybe I could trip the system, give us a bit of a breeze.”

He found the right program for the ventilation system, but the fans were shut off. Without asking the driver, he opened up the control panel and pulled out some wires and spliced them together until the fans turned on with a loud clang.

“That’s it!” He ran back to the hatch and looked down. “Might shift the fumes a bit, give us a good look.”

The driver peered cautiously over the edge. “What are those shapes?”

“They’re alive.” Giant claws snapped up at them, and the Doctor realised that what he’d thought were lights were actually eyes.

“What the hell are they?”

“Macra,” he announced grimly.

oOoOoOoOo

Martha sat uncomfortably in the back of Brannigan and Valerie’s car, feeling a bit put out at being left behind. The Doctor claimed that her physical limitations wouldn’t allow her to keep up with him, but she didn’t think he would refuse to let Rose join him just because something happened to be a little dangerous. And Rose might be more like the Doctor—whatever that meant—but she was still
basically human, wasn’t she?

The sound of metal being cut filled the car, and Brannigan looked at the ceiling, where they could clearly see the light of a blowtorch. “Just what we need—pirates!” he said grumbled.

“I’m calling the police!” Valerie shouted.

Martha stood up, being careful not to stand directly under the hatch, and moved to the back of the car. Maybe she couldn’t help the Doctor rescue Rose, but she could help this couple protect their kittens.

The hatch dropped to the floor and another cat person stuck her head into the car, holding a gun on Brannigan. “The Doctor. Where is he?”

“We’re not telling you that,” Martha said indignantly. “Not while you’re pointing a gun at us.”

She dropped into the car and looked at Martha, then at the coat lying on the bed. “You travel with him. You want to protect him, but you don’t need to protect him from me.”

“How do we know you’re telling the truth?” Brannigan asked.

“I need his help,” she said.

Martha and Brannigan had a silent conversation, and finally Martha said, “He left about ten minutes ago, looking for Rose.”

“How did he leave?”

“The same way you came in,” Martha said, pointing at the floor hatch.

She nodded. “Thank you. I apologise for damaging your vehicle,” she told Brannigan, then cut another hole in the bottom of the car and dropped down to the next layer of cars.

“Well, that was certainly something,” Brannigan said. “Never seen anyone travel outside of a car, and now I’ve seen it twice in one day.”

An awkward silence filled the car. Now that she was alone and in no immediate danger, Martha realised she was trapped in a tiny space with perfect strangers. What did a person say in a situation like this?

“So Martha,” Valerie said, “where’s home for you? Because obviously you and the Doctor aren’t from New New York.”

Martha looked out the window at the endless rows of cars, and realised how far she was from London. “It’s a long way away,” she said slowly. “I didn’t really think. I just followed the Doctor and Rose, and they don’t even know where I am. My mum and dad,” she clarified. “If I died here, they’d never know.” The thought was terrifying.

“What about the Doctor and Rose?” Brannigan asked. “Who are they? Because there’s something about the Doctor that I’d be afraid of if I wasn’t sure he was a good man.”

“He certainly seems to be in love with his wife, though,” Valerie added.

Martha gave a half smile. “Yeah, that’s one of the few things I actually know about him.” The truth of that statement sank in, and her smile disappeared. “But other than that, I don’t really know them—not really.”
Rose grabbed onto the back of Milo’s seat as enormous claws reached out of the clouds of exhaust to snap at the car. The three minutes since the other car had been destroyed felt like they’d stretched into an hour.

“Go faster!” Cheen yelled when one set of claws came particularly close.

Milo clutched the steering wheel. “I’m at top speed!” He stared at the control panel; as soon as he’d accepted the situation they were in, he’d put in a request to return to the motorway.

“No access above,” the computer told them.

“But this is an emergency!” he begged, before calling the police.

The call to the police led to an automated message. “Thank you for your call. You have been placed on hold.”

Rose thought quickly as the car continued to shake violently. They were never going to be able to escape whatever was out there. The Doctor would come through—he knew he would—but she had to stay alive until then.

“Turn everything off,” she ordered.

Milo’s voice jumped up to a higher register. “You’ve got to be joking.”

“It works on submarines,” Rose pointed out, but was met by blank stares. “All I’m saying, is if it can’t see—and how can it—it’s got to be finding us some other way. And everything else, like the sound of the car, that would all stop if we just shut things off.”

“What if you’re wrong?” he demanded.

The car shook with another vicious blow. “D’you think it could actually get worse than this?” Rose yelled. “Just do it!”

Milo sucked in a deep breath, then unhooked something in the console above their heads and hit a button on the control panel. The car stopped, dead quiet and completely dark. After a few more clicks of the claws over their head, the creatures stopped grabbing at them, and Rose drew a sigh of relief that she’d been right.

Cheen swallowed hard. “They’ve stopped.”

“Yeah, but they’re still out there,” Milo pointed out.

“How did you think of that?” Cheen asked Rose.

Rose shrugged. “I saw it on a film.” She bit her lip. “The trouble is, I can’t remember what they did next.”

“Well, you’d better think of something,” Milo whispered, “because we’ve lost the aircon. If we don’t switch the engines back on, we won’t be able to breathe.”

Rose shuddered. She should have known it wouldn’t be that easy. “How long have we got?”

“Eight minutes, maximum.”
Cheen moaned, and Rose took her hand. Focusing on keeping the other woman calm would allay her own panic, which was important because she had no intention of letting the Doctor know their deadline was so tight.

She didn’t know how he was doing it, but he’d been steadily getting closer over the last twenty minutes or so. Rose couldn’t be too excited by his rescue attempt, since she knew he’d never be able to get through the bottom layer of the motorway down to the fast lane, but he’d find another way once he realised that. She knew he would.

.oOoOoOoOo.

The Doctor stared down at the teeming mass of claws and eyes. “The macra used to be the scourge of this galaxy. Gas.” He nodded at the driver. “They fed off gas, the filthier the better. They built up a small empire using humans as slaves and mining gas for food.”

“They don’t exactly look like empire builders to me,” the driver countered.

“Well, that was billions of years ago,” the Doctor explained. “Billions. They must have devolved down the years. Now they’re just beasts. But they’re still hungry, and my wife is down there.”

The echo of the seal on the roof hatch unlocking sounded loudly in the car. The owner of the car stood up to see who was coming in now. “Oh, it’s like New Times Square in here, for goodness’ sake!”

“I’ve invented a sport,” the Doctor said bemusedly.

The newcomer—a female catkind in a nun’s wimple—dropped onto the floor. “Doctor, you’re a hard man to find.”

“No guns,” the driver said, pointing to the large weapon she carried. “I’m not having guns.”

“I only brought this in case of pirates,” she said impatiently. “Doctor, you’ve got to come with me.”

The Doctor wrinkled his forehead. She talked as if they’d met before. “Do I know you?”

She sighed ruefully and looked at the floor. “You haven’t aged at all. Time has been less kind to me.”

The Doctor put his hands on her shoulders and squinted at her for a moment before her face registered. “Novice Hame!” He hugged her, then pulled back suddenly. “No, hold on. Get off! Last time we met, you were breeding humans for experimentation.”

“I’ve sought forgiveness, Doctor,” she said earnestly, “for so many years, under his guidance. And if you come with me, I might finally be able to redeem myself.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” The Doctor shook his head, then pointed down to the bottom of the motorway. “You’ve got macra living underneath this city. Macra! And Rose is stuck down there, and I don’t think she has much time left.”

The stifled panic he felt from Rose had him on edge, all the more so because she hadn’t told him what was wrong. Although, given that there were macra living under the motorway, and that the fast lane was the very bottom layer of cars, he could guess.

“You’ve got to come with me right now,” Novice Hame insisted.
Novice Hame’s shoulders drooped. “I’m sorry, Doctor. But the situation is even worse than you can imagine.” She grabbed his wrist, and the Doctor realised too late that she had a personal teleport. “Transport.”

“Don’t you dare! Don’t you dare!” He tugged at his wrist but it was too late. Blue light engulfed them, and the car disappeared around them.

The teleport dropped them hard at their destination, and the Doctor and Novice Hame both stumbled on arrival and fell flat on their faces. The Doctor groaned as he picked himself up off the floor. “Oh! Rough teleport. Ow.”

After he’d shaken the fog out of his head, he glared at Novice Hame. “You can go straight back down and teleport people out, starting with Rose.”

That claim didn’t move the Doctor. “Then get some more!” He looked around, but didn’t recognise his surroundings. “Where are we?”

“High above, in the over-city.”

“Good,” the Doctor said, his frustration at being unable to rescue Rose spilling out into anger. “Because you can tell the Senate of New New York I’d like a word. They have got thousands of people trapped on the motorway. Millions!”

Novice Hame looked at him pityingly. “But you’re inside the Senate, right now. May the goddess Santori bless them.”

She pressed a button on her wrist device and the lights came on, revealing a long chamber flanked by rows of seats. The Doctor looked around the Senate Room and realised the gallery seats were filled with skeletons.

“They died, Doctor,” she said quietly. “The city died.”

The tragic sight drained some of the Doctor’s anger away. “How long’s it been like this?” he asked as he walked slowly through the room.

“Twenty-four years.”

He crouched down beside the nearest skeleton, lying prone on a platform. “All of them? Everyone? What happened?”

“A new chemical. A new mood.”

The Doctor listened to the story with growing horror.

“They called it Bliss. Everyone tried it. They couldn’t stop. A virus mutated inside the compound and became airborne. Everything perished. Even the virus, in the end. It killed the world in seven minutes flat.” Her voice trembled with emotion, and the Doctor looked up at her sympathetically. “There was just enough time to close down the walkways and the flyovers, sealing off the undercity. Those people on the motorway aren’t lost, Doctor. They were saved.”

The Doctor stood back up and tried to process what he’d just learned. “So the whole thing down
there is running on automatic.”

“There’s not enough power to get them out. We did all we could to stop the system from choking.”

“Who’s we?” Another question came fast on the heels of the first. “How did you survive?”

“He protected me,” she said reverently. “And he has waited for you, these long years.”

*Doctor.*

The telepathic voice coming from the shadows was one he recognised. The Doctor jogged out of the senate room and into the lobby off to the side, stopping in front of a large jar. “The Face of Boe!”

*I knew you would come.*

The Doctor knelt in front of him, and Novice Hame continued her explanation. “Back in the old days, I was made his nurse as penance for my sin.”

The familiar presence in his mind was weak, which explained why the Doctor hadn’t realised he was on the planet the moment they arrived. “Old friend, what happened to you?”

*Failing.*

“He protected me from the virus by shrouding me in his smoke,” said Novice Hame. “But with no one to maintain it, the city’s power died. The under-city would have fallen into the sea.”

The Doctor stared into the distance. “So he saved them.”

“The Face of Boe wired himself into the mainframe. He’s giving his life force just to keep things running.”

There was still one thing that didn’t make sense to the Doctor. “But there are planets out there. You could have called for help.”

She shook her head. “The last act of the Senate was to declare New Earth unsafe. The automatic quarantine lasts for one hundred years.”

The Doctor stood up and faced the nun. “So the two of you stayed here, on your own for all these years.”

“We had no choice.”

The Doctor was awed by immensity of their sacrifice, and he put a gentle hand on the nun’s arm. “Yes, you did.”

*Save them, Doctor,* the Face of Boe pleaded. *Save them.*

* oOoOoOoOo

Sitting in the car with the two humans, Rose cursed the time senses that let her feel the seconds of their air supply dwindle away. She knew the Doctor had sensed her urgency, but she still hadn’t told him how little time they had remaining.

The tiniest part of her brain considered what it would be like if she had to tell him goodbye. She shoved the gloomy thought out of the way as soon as it intruded, locking it up before the Doctor could catch it.
“How much air’s left?” Cheen asked.

“Two minutes,” Rose and Milo answered in unison.

He looked at her, and she shrugged. “I have a gift for keeping track of time,” she said, and it wasn’t a lie.

Rose looked worriedly at the two humans. They were both sweating profusely, and their breathing had become laboured. She felt a little guilty that she wasn’t feeling the lack of oxygen as badly as Milo and Cheen were, and she wanted to encourage them somehow.

“That’s plenty of time for the Doctor to save us,” she told them. “And not just us, but everyone on the motorway.”

Milo sighed and shook his head. “Rose, no one’s coming.”

She smiled faintly. “The Doctor and I once killed Satan to save each other’s lives. Trust me. There’s no power on New Earth that can stop him from getting me out of here—and if I weren’t stuck in this car, there wouldn’t be anything that could keep me from getting home to him.”

“He looked kind of nice,” Cheen said.

Rose sat back on her heels. “He can be, yeah—though he wasn’t too happy with you for kidnapping me.”

“How did you meet him?”

She laughed. “He blew up my job.” Milo’s jaw dropped, and she shook her head. “It had been taken over by these… these creatures. They had me cornered down in the basement. I thought I was going to die, then a hand grabbed mine. I looked over, and this fantastic bloke whispered, ‘Run!’” Rose’s hand flexed; she could almost feel her first Doctor’s calloused fingers. “So I ran… and we never really stopped.”

Cheen was impressed, but Milo still didn’t look convinced. “Really,” Rose insisted. “The Doctor is amazing. Even if I weren’t in danger, he would still figure out a way to take care of whatever is down here and rescue all of you. We’ve done it so many times before. It’s just who we are.”

The three passengers looked at each other, and Rose saw the moment Milo made a decision. “Right,” he said, and turned the car back on.

Rose started to protest, then she understood what he was doing. He was giving the Doctor time to find a solution. They had a better chance of dodging the claws than they did of staying alive in a car running out of oxygen.

Milo took Cheen’s hand, and they looked back at Rose. “Good luck.”

She nodded, a smile on her face. “You too.”

Claws started snapping at them almost immediately, and Rose closed her eyes and clenched her fists in her lap. Hurry, she begged the Doctor, unable to keep her fear from him any longer.

oOoOoOoOo

The Doctor accessed the city’s mainframe from a terminal in the lobby. He pulled up the program that tracked the cars, and quickly scanned for one particular number, pointing jubilantly at the
monitor when he found it. “Car four six five diamond six. It still registers! That’s Rose. Oh, she’s always brilliant, my Rose.”

His relief evaporated when Rose’s lingering fear swelled into terror, along with a single, chilling word—Hurry.

A series of Gallifreyan curses spilled from his lips. Novice Hame merely raised her eyebrows, but the Face of Boe sighed out a breath. Doctor... you must focus if you wish to rescue your bond mate.

The Doctor didn’t even ask how he’d known he and Rose were bonded. To a telepath as strong as the Face of Boe, it would be as obvious as... as the ring on his finger.

“Right.” He had a plan, and he needed to follow through on it. “Novice Hame.” She turned around and he pointed to a lever. “Hold that in place.” The Doctor followed the thick electrical cables to a transformer box. “Think, think, think, think. Take the residual energy, invert it, feed it through the electricity grid.”

“There isn’t enough power,” Novice Hame protested.

The Doctor started flipping switches on the panel controlling the grid. “Oh, you’ve got power. You’ve got me. I’m brilliant with computers, just you watch.” He turned around and pointed at the other terminal. “Hame, every switch on that bank up to maximum.”

She adjusted the switches, and the Doctor went back to the transformer. He laid down on the floor next to it, sonicking the connections so they could handle more power. “I can’t power up the city, but all the city needs is people.”

“So what are you going to do?” she asked.

“This!” The Doctor leapt to his feet and threw the huge switch by the transformer. For a moment it seemed like it would work, then the lights went off in the room as all the power drained. “No, no, no, no, no, no!”

He used his sonic screwdriver to run a diagnostic on the transformer box, and didn’t get the answer he’d hoped for. “The transformers are blocked. The signal can’t get through.”

Doctor, the Face of Boe said

“Yeah, hold on, not now.”

I give you my last...

He wheezed out a long breath, and the computers all came back on. “Hame, look after him,” the Doctor ordered. “Don’t you go dying on me, you big old face. You’ve got to see this.” The Doctor flipped the switch again, and this time it worked. “The open road. Ha!”

oOoOoOoOo

Martha looked at the Doctor’s coat and wondered if she’d ever see him or Rose again, if she’d ever see her family again. Thirty minutes had passed since the Doctor had left, twenty since the cat-nun had passed through looking for him.

A loud, mechanical clang from overhead pulled her out of her morose thoughts.

“What in Jehovah was that?” Brannigan wondered aloud.
“It’s coming from above!” Valerie said unnecessarily.

“What is it? What’s happening?!” Brannigan asked.

The kittens started meowing and Valerie covered their basket in motherly fear, but Martha smiled. “That’s the Doctor,” she said.

Brannigan opened the roof hatch and looked out. “By all the cats in the kingdom,” he murmured.

“What is it?” Valerie asked as light streamed into the car. “What is it?” she repeated, then sucked in a breath. “It’s the sun! Oh, Brannigan. Children, it’s the sunlight.”

The monitor flickered on, and the Doctor’s face appeared onscreen. “Sorry, no Sally Calypso. She was just a hologram. My name’s the Doctor.”

“He’s a magician,” Brannigan said, and Martha had to agree with him.

“And this is an order,” the Doctor continued. “Everyone drive up. Right now. I’ve opened the roof of the motorway. Come on. Throttle those engines. Drive up. All of you. The whole under-city. Drive up, drive up, drive up! Fast!”

Brannigan put the car in gear with a giddy laugh. “Here we go.”

“We’ve got to clear that fast lane,” the Doctor said. “Drive up and get out of the way.”

oOoOoOoOo

In the five minutes since they’d turned the engine back on, car four six five diamond six had barely escaped being destroyed by the claws. Milo stared straight ahead as he evaded them while Cheen sobbed quietly at his side.

When a claw grabbed them out of the air, Rose wondered for a moment if this was it. The Doctor was working on a solution, she could tell, but would it matter if she’d been crushed to bits by a giant claw?

Milo turned the wheel sharply and managed to get away from the creature yet again, and Rose took a deep breath. It’s not over yet, she chided herself. Don’t give up.

She choked out something between a sob and a laugh when the Doctor’s face appeared on the screen. As he gave the order for everyone to evacuate the motorway, some of Rose’s tension melted away. If they could all just get out of here…

“Oi!” he said sharply. “Car four six five diamond six. Rose! Drive up!”

“That’s the Doctor!” Rose said happily.

“We can’t go up!” Milo protested, pointing upwards. “We’ll hit the layer!”

“Oh for… Just do as he says!” Rose exclaimed, seconds away from taking the wheel and doing it herself.

“You’ve got access above,” the Doctor promised. “Now go!”

Milo shook his head, but steered the car up, away from the grasping claws. A sickly light shone through the thick haze of exhaust as they joined the line of cars streaming out of the motorway, and they all squinted at it.
Cheen realised what it was first. “It’s daylight. Oh my God, that’s the sky—the real sky.”

Rose laughed exuberantly. “He did it! I told you, he did it!”

On his monitor, the Doctor watched the numbers indicating cars flying up and out of the motorway. When he saw the car Rose was in move towards the sky, he let out a sigh of relief.

“Did I tell you, Doctor?” Brannigan said over the radio. “You’re not bad, sir. You’re not bad at all! Oh, yee-hah!”

The Doctor shook his head and grinned. “You keep driving, Brannigan. All the way up.” He spun across the Senate Room to the window and looked out at the beautiful but empty city. “Because it’s here, just waiting for you. The city of New New York, and it’s yours. Martha, I told you I wouldn’t leave you here. And don’t forget, I want that coat back.”

“You got it, mister,” she said, sounding relieved.

“And car four six five diamond six, I’ve sent you a flight path. Come to the Senate.”

“We’re on our way,” Rose told him.

The Doctor closed his eyes against the rush of emotion brought on by hearing her voice. It’s been too long since I saw you, love.

Rose didn’t protest that it had only been a few hours. It wasn’t the length of time, but the uncertainty of how long the separation would last that had made it difficult.

I’ll be there soon. You saved us, my Doctor—just like I knew you would.

“Doctor!”

He turned around at Novice Hame’s cry, just in time to see a crack spread across the Face of Boe’s tank. The crisis apparent, he left his perch by the window and joined the nun in trying to find a way to repair the integrity of the glass.

Brannigan dropped Martha and his coat off, and the medical student quickly grasped the situation.

“Can I help?”

“I don’t know if there’s anything we can do,” the Doctor said helplessly.

The crack kept spreading, and finally, the pressure from inside the tank caused the glass to shatter. The Face of Boe slid out onto the floor of the lobby, without the protection of his smoke and his life support systems failing.

Some of the Doctor’s elation drained away as he realised he’d managed to save Rose and Martha, but had quite possibly lost a friend.

He felt the moment Rose entered the room. In the back, Rose. There’s an old friend who’d like to say hello.

She knelt down beside him, and his hand automatically reached for hers. “You remember the Face of Boe, don’t you? And Novice Hame?” He looked down at the dying ancient. “He’s the one that saved you, not me.”

“My lord gave his life to save the city, and now he’s dying,” Novice Hame said, almost in tears.
“No, don’t say that,” the Doctor insisted, even though he knew it was the truth. “Not old Boe. Plenty of life left.”

Boe took a deep breath. *It’s good to breathe the air once more.*

“Who is he?” asked Martha.

“I don’t even know,” the Doctor said, slightly surprised by the realisation. “Legend says the Face of Boe has lived for billions of years. Isn’t that right? And you’re not about to give up now.”

*Everything has its time. You know that, old friend, better than most.*

Novice Hame looked at the Doctor. “The legend says more.”

The Doctor’s eyes widened. “Don’t. There’s no need for that.”

She didn’t flinch away from his gaze. “It says that the Face of Boe will speak his final secret to a traveller.”

“Yeah, but not yet,” the Doctor insisted.

Rose rested her head on his shoulder, offering her strength.

“Who needs secrets, eh?”

*I have seen so much,* Boe said. *Perhaps too much. I am the last of my kind, as you are the last of yours, Doctor.*

The reminder of his lost people hurt, as it always did. “That’s why we have to survive. Both of us. Don’t go.”

*I must. But know this,* Time Lord. Boe drew a breath and spoke aloud for the first time, to the Doctor’s knowledge. “You are not alone.”

The Doctor stared blankly as his friend’s eyes closed for the last time. *You are not alone? What could he possibly mean?*

He forced the obvious answer to the back of his mind and looked at his companions again. Novice Hame was in tears, and Rose had an arm wrapped around the nun. Martha looked slightly uncomfortable, like she’d just witnessed something private… and he supposed she had.

“I think it’s time we were leaving,” the Doctor said quietly. “Novice Hame, I met a man on the motorway named Brannigan. He could help rebuild this city.”

She sniffed, then nodded. “I will find him, Doctor. Thank you for all you have done for New Earth.”

As it happened, Brannigan gave them a ride back to Pharmacy Town, insisting it was the least he could do. “And it gives me a chance to meet your lovely wife,” he added, winking at Rose.

He soon picked up on the sombre attitude in the three off-worlders and quieted down for the rest of the ride, only offering sincere thanks to the Doctor as he dropped them off.

“You gave us our lives back, sir, and I can’t thank you enough for that.”
The Doctor clung to Rose’s hand as they walked back towards the TARDIS. He stopped for a moment at the drug stalls and looked around. “All closed down.”

“Happy?” Rose asked, nudging his shoulder.

“Happy happy.” He peered inside one of the stalls and was satisfied that it was actually empty. “New New York can start again. And they’ve got Novice Hame. Just what every city needs, cats in charge.”

He looked over at Martha and tipped his head in the direction of the TARDIS. “Come on, time we were off.”

Martha watched the Doctor and Rose walk away. He was putting on this face, like he was all right, but he wasn’t. And Rose knew it, but she wasn’t saying anything either.

“But what did he mean, the Face of Boe?” Martha asked as she followed them back to the TARDIS. Neither of them answered, so she kept asking questions so they’d know she wasn’t going to give up on this. “I mean, you’re not alone.”

“I don’t know,” the Doctor said, his voice not inviting further questions.

“So he didn’t mean because you’ve got Rose, or friends?”

He looked at Rose, and Martha thought she saw a little of the sadness leave his eyes. “Rose helps,” he said quietly, “but I don’t think that’s what he meant.”

They reached the TARDIS, and Martha waited until they were inside to press for more. “Then what?”

The Doctor didn’t answer, just walked slowly around the console, flipping levers to take them someplace else, someplace new.

She’d almost given up on getting answers out of him, but the realisation that she barely knew these people honestly frightened her a little, so she pushed one more time.

“He said last of your kind. What does that mean?”

Rose shot her a warning look. “Martha—”

But to Martha’s surprise, the Doctor sighed and stopped Rose with a raised hand. “I’m not just a Time Lord,” he said, finally looking at Martha. “I’m the last of the Time Lords. The Face of Boe was wrong. There’s no one else.”

That answer was far more than anything Martha had expected, and the grief on his face as he said it was profound. “What happened? If I can ask,” she added hurriedly.

He slouched onto the jump seat and rubbed his hands over his face. The TARDIS lowered the lights in the console room until the greenish light of the time rotor was all that was left, and Martha stared at the Doctor, cast in shadow.

“There was a war,” he said finally. “A Time War. The last Great Time War. My people fought a race called the Daleks, for the sake of all creation, and they lost.” He paused for a moment and in the dim light, Martha could see his Adam’s apple bob. “They lost. Everyone lost. They’re all gone now. My family, my friends… my planet.”
Martha blanched. She’d been upset that they hadn’t told her anything, but it hadn’t occurred to her they didn’t talk about their pasts because it was too painful.

“I’m sorry,” she said finally, feeling like the words were wholly inadequate for the situation.

“You had no way of knowing,” the Doctor said. “And… I suppose hearing that someone is the last of their kind would make anyone curious.”

Martha watched as Rose moved to stand behind him and ran her fingers through his hair. “I think I’d like to rest before we go anywhere else,” she said, and if the Doctor realised her true motivation was concern for him, he didn’t let on. “Martha, the TARDIS will give you a room. Just go down that corridor,” she nodded to the left, “and it’ll be the second door on the right.”

“Thanks,” she said, feeling like she could actually sleep. “Just wake me up for breakfast.”

“Of course. Good night, Martha.”

When she reached the corridor, Martha thought to say goodnight to the Doctor and Rose. But when she turned around, the Doctor’s eyes were closed and his shoulders were slumped, and Rose was pressing a kiss to the top of his head. Not wanting to interrupt the intimate moment, she turned around silently and went to hunt down the room Rose had promised.
After Martha left the room, Rose took the Doctor’s hand and pulled him out of the jump seat. His face was lined with sorrow, and her heart ached for him. *Come with me, my love.*

The Doctor followed her to their room, but he looked at the bed uncertainly. “I don’t know if I’m ready to lie down yet.”

“No,” she said softly when he looked at her. “Neither am I.” She smiled softly when the Doctor frowned and scratched his cheek as he watched her change into a pair of pyjamas. “I just thought… maybe we could sit somewhere together. Today was...” She fiddled with the hem of her top. “Being separated like that…”

“I know.” He walked around the bed and held out a hand. “Let’s go sit in the study. Of all the rooms we use, that’s the only one the TARDIS won’t lead companions to.” Rose raised an eyebrow, and his answering smile was almost mischievous. “Why do you think I was so surprised when you walked in? That room is Unplottable, Rose Tyler, and you found it anyway.”

She eyed her Doctor, and instead of taking his hand, she unbuttoned his jacket, pushed it off his shoulders, and laid it down on the bed. “The tie too,” she said, determined that he be as comfortable as possible.

The Doctor made a face, but did as he was told, going as far as to unbutton the next button on his shirt and roll his sleeves up. “Now will you come with me?” he asked in a fake long-suffering tone.

Before Rose could answer, she felt something strange in her head. She and the Doctor both looked at the wall of their bedroom, unsurprised to see a new door.

What was a surprise, however, was the slight redecoration they discovered when they opened the door. Instead of the two matching chairs flanking the fireplace, there was one wide, brown couch with a few blue throw pillows and a soft blanket folded up on the floor beside it.

“Did you—” Rose and the Doctor started to ask together. They shook their heads in shared disbelief at the ship’s insight, then Rose sat down in the corner of the couch and encouraged the Doctor to stretch out with his head in her lap.

“She must have pulled this from our minds,” he murmured as he settled in.

“Well, it’s the most comfortable couch I’ve ever sat on, so she’s done well,” Rose said.

The Doctor hummed his agreement. The sound deepened into a purr when Rose started massaging his head, and she smiled down at him.

The creases left on his brow from the day’s adventure were her first target. She stroked lightly up the bridge of his nose, then pressed down harder in between his eyebrows. He sighed and settled deeper into the sofa, and Rose continued to smooth the tension away.

“I was afraid today,” he said after a few minutes.

Her hands moved to his sideburns. The shorter hairs here were slightly prickly, and she purposely rubbed the wrong way, just to feel that texture against her fingers. The Doctor’s lips parted, and she ran her thumb over his full bottom lip.

“So was I,” she admitted. “When we shut the car off and Milo said we only had eight minutes of air
The Doctor’s eyes opened, and the wrinkle she’d just massaged away returned. “You didn’t tell me that.”

_Oops._ “I knew you were doing everything you could,” she told him gently. “Telling you there was an impossible deadline would only have distracted you.”

His frown deepened, then he sighed and closed his eyes again. “You’re right,” he admitted reluctantly.

“And you did it. You saved all those people, and me.”

Rose sank her fingers into his hair, loving the silky feel of it. The Doctor’s mouth dropped open again, and he pushed his head into her hand.

“I couldn’t have done it without the Face of Boe,” he said after a minute.

It was the perfect lead-in for what she really wanted to talk about, but looking down at his relaxed face, she almost couldn’t bear to bring up something that might be so painful.

“It’s all right, Rose.”

“What do you think he meant?” she asked finally.

He let out a deep sigh, and some of the tension returned to his body. “I honestly have no idea. The way he said it… calling me Time Lord instead of by my name… The obvious interpretation is that there’s another Time Lord still alive.” His eyes opened, and he smiled up at Rose. “A Gallifreyan Time Lord, not a human one,” he added, reaching up to brush the back of his fingers over her cheek.

Rose nodded; that had been her interpretation as well. She took a breath and mentioned the elephant in the room. “You mean someone else who survived the War.”

The muscle in his jaw flexed, then relaxed. “But there can’t be,” he said, definitively. “I told you, remember? You asked, and I said I’d feel them, in my head.”

Rose nodded; she remembered Utah and Van Statten clearly.

“He must have meant something else, but I can’t…”

The Doctor’s hands twitched, clenching and releasing over and over. Rose reached down and took one of them. It was a slightly awkward hold, but the familiar sensation of her palm against his calmed him.

She bit her lip; there was more she wanted to ask, but it had been such a long day, for both of them…

His eyes opened. “What do you want to know, Rose?”

“Will you tell me more about it, Doctor? About Gallifrey?” she asked. “The room we were bonded in was beautiful.”

When he let go of her hand and sat up, Rose cursed herself for pushing too far. Then she realised he was wrapping his arm around her shoulders and resting his cheek against her temple.

“The sky was a burnt orange, with the Citadel enclosed in a mighty glass dome, shining under the
twin suns.”

Rose closed her eyes and tried to picture what he was describing. With the small glimpse of Gallifrey that she’d been given on their wedding day, it was easy to add details and embellishments as the Doctor spoke.

“Beyond that, the mountains went on forever. There were slopes of deep red grass, capped with snow.” The Doctor’s voice hitched. “I miss that view the most. The second sun would rise in the south, and the mountains would shine. The leaves on the trees were silver, and when they caught the light every morning, it looked like a forest on fire. When the autumn came, the breeze would blow through the branches like a song."

His breathing was ragged when he stopped talking. “It sounds beautiful, Doctor,” Rose whispered.

“It was. Oh, Rose.”

She bit her lip. “If you could undo it…”

“Never,” he said firmly. “The Time Lords were an impossibly arrogant lot to start with, and the Time War completely corrupted them—at least the ones in charge, and the rest were easily swayed.” He swallowed hard. “I couldn’t bring back the Time Lords, but… they were only one thousand of the lives lost. All the other Gallifreyans…”

She felt his guilt welling up, and wondered what had driven her to ask this right now. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, stroking his chest. “I shouldn’t have—”

The Doctor rested his head against the back of the couch and stared at the ceiling, memories washing over him. “Do you know what the worst part is?”

He felt Rose shift in his arms so she could look at him. “What?”

“It’s been almost four years now. I’ve gone over it hundreds of times in my head—the last few months of the War, and the days leading up to the final moment. And no matter how I look at it, I still can’t see what I could have done differently.”

Rose’s soft hand cupped his jaw, and he looked down at her. “Shouldn’t that make it better?” she asked. “Knowing that even as terrible as it was, it really was the only thing you could do?”

The Doctor grimaced; a headache was building behind his eyes. “Maybe. But I can’t stop analysing it. I’ve always believed that violence doesn’t solve anything, and yet I committed double genocide with the push of a button.”

“And would you feel better if you discovered there was something else you could have done?” Rose shook her head. “Doctor, why are you punishing yourself like that?”

He ground his teeth, and pain exploded behind his right eye, through the temple area, and down into the jaw. “Because I deserve to be punished! I destroyed two races, Rose, on top of the dozens of civilisations the War had already damaged irreparably. Nothing can undo that.”

Rose was quiet for a several minutes. The Doctor could tell she was deep in thought, but his own mind was too frazzled for him to be able to pick up on her train of thought

When she finally spoke, she said the last thing he’d expected her to say. “You’re right.”

“What?” Rose wasn’t supposed to agree with his self-condemnation. She was the one who always
tried to get him to see the good in himself.

“You’re right,” she repeated. “Nothing can undo it. Your planet is gone, and your people with it.”

The Doctor flinched away from her, curling himself into the corner of the couch. Hearing the harsh truth from her lips prodded at the ache lodged in his chest that he’d been trying to ignore since he’d ended the War. “Rose, please…” he whispered.

But she was relentless. “I can’t imagine what it must have felt like, to look at the destruction both sides were causing and know it was a choice between the end of the War, or the end of the universe.”

The memory of that moment was still crystal clear in the Doctor’s mind, however. He’d felt the timelines converging for months—years even—until there had been only two possible endings to the War.

He’d tried so hard to find another way. His eighth incarnation had fought on the front lines, becoming a warrior instead of the Doctor he’d claimed to be. But when the Daleks broke through the sky trenches and Arcadia fell, he’d known there was no other way. Breaking into the archives was easy. Using the Moment… was not.

His eyes grew hot, and the Doctor felt a tear streak down his face. He wiped it away impatiently, but another followed, and another, until sobs shook his body.

Rose reached for him then, and despite his hurt confusion, he let her guide him until they were both lying down on the couch. She offered the comfort then that she’d withheld earlier, and he sank into the solace their bond provided, leaning on her strength.

His tears slowed gradually, and as they did, he realised Rose was whispering words of comfort and apology as she rubbed his back. He pulled back enough to look at her face, noticing the damp spot his tears had left on her shirt as he did so.

Rose was biting her lip and there were tears in her own eyes. “I’m sorry,” she said, answering his unspoken question. “But I just thought… had you ever let yourself grieve, Doctor?”

A sharp retort sprung to his lips—of course he’d grieved. But his scratchy eyes and sore throat gave him pause. Had he ever allowed himself the release of tears?

She nodded. “That’s what I thought. An’ it’s not good to just hold all that in for so long. It was time to let it go, Doctor.”

Then he understood why she’d pushed the painful topic. Her wisdom amazed him, and her selflessness humbled him. Because he could feel her uncertainty loud and clear over the bond—she hadn’t known how he would react, still wasn’t totally positive, but she’d loved him enough to risk his anger regardless.

The Doctor opened his mouth to thank her, but a huge yawn swallowed the words. “I think I might be ready to sleep now,” he told her.

“Then let’s get into bed.”

Rose didn’t bother to hide the concern on her face as she watched the Doctor change into his pyjamas and crawl under the covers. The weariness written in every line of his body worried her—he desperately needed a solid night of sleep, but with the memories of the War stirred up, how could he possibly avoid nightmares tonight?
Unless… She bit her lip as the memory of the night after she’d said goodbye to her mum came back to her. The Doctor had kept the nightmares at bay, and he’d told her the next morning that the bond would make it possible for her to do the same for him.

She washed her face hurriedly, but by the time she’d changed into a nightgown, he was already asleep. Her heart broke looking down at him. Usually he seemed younger and less careworn in sleep, but tonight, the simulated moonlight streaming in through the artificial window highlighted the deep furrows between his eyebrows. No matter how hard she’d tried to massage them away, they stubbornly remained.

Her own tiredness tempted her to stretch out beside him, but there was no way she would be able to stay awake if she lay down. Instead, she arranged her pillows into a pile and reclined against them. The novel she’d been reading suddenly appeared on the bedside table, and Rose patted the wall in silent thanks as she picked it up and started to read.

When the Doctor woke up, he knew immediately that he’d slept for five hours, without interruption and without nightmares. He was as confused as he was relieved… until he opened his eyes and saw Rose sitting up with her back against the headboard, still awake.

“Hey,” she said. “Feeling better?”

“You shielded me from nightmares,” he said, answering her question and asking one of his own with the same words.

Rose smiled and ran her hand through his hair. “I didn’t know what I was doing, exactly, but I tried my best.”

The Doctor took in the lines around her eyes and remembered that she’d been kidnapped and held hostage for hours. He tugged on her hand until she was stretched out beside him.

“Thank you,” he whispered into her hair. “I think it’s your turn to sleep now, though.”

A sigh escaped Rose as she relaxed against his side. “Love you,” she mumbled as she drifted off to sleep.
Rose knew the Doctor wasn’t in bed with her before she opened her eyes the next morning. But there was a lightness in his telepathic presence that she’d never sensed before, so rather than worry, she rolled over and pulled the duvet up over her head.

A moment later, it was tugged out of her hand. Rose groaned and looked up at the Doctor, blinking as the simulated sunlight shone into her eyes.

“Time to rise and shine, Rose Tyler!”

She pushed herself up and started to complain about wanting more sleep, but then she caught her first real glimpse of the Doctor. “You’re…” She blinked, but the image didn’t change. “You’re wearing a different suit.”

The Doctor buttoned the cuffs on his light blue Oxford, then sat down on the edge of the bed and started lacing up a pair of dark red Chucks. “The TARDIS had it in our wardrobe this morning,” he said. “I opened the doors, just thinking of maybe finding a new tie or a different shirt, but there was a brand new suit.” He stood up and grabbed his tie from where he’d left it, lying over the back of the chair.

“It fits the same as the brown one,” Rose observed as he flipped up his collar to put his tie on.

He finished the knot and waggled his eyebrows at her. “Guess she knows what we both like.” He ducked, and the pillow she threw at his head missed. “Come on, what do you think?”

Rose let her eyes travel down his body, purposely taking her time. She knew the Doctor could easily read her approval, but he was still impatient for her to say something.

“It’s nice,” she offered finally. “Different.”

“Nice?” he squeaked. “Different? Is that all you can say?”

She crossed her arms over her chest and nibbled on her lip as she appraised him again. “The blue suits you,” she finally offered.

The pun distracted him, as she’d known it would. “It does suit me, doesn’t it?” He turned and preened in front of her vanity mirror.

The view from the back was even nicer, and Rose enjoyed the opportunity to stare at his bum. Blue or brown, his pinstriped trousers fit him exceptionally well.

The Doctor caught her gaze in the mirror and smirked at her. “I think you might like my new blue suit a little more than you let on, love,” he purred.

A shiver ran through Rose’s body at the suggestive note in her Doctor’s voice, and her breath caught in her throat when she felt the first stirring of desire from him. She held his gaze in the mirror as she swung her legs off of the bed, watching his eyes darken when the left strap of her nightgown slipped off her shoulder.

When she was within arm’s reach, the Doctor traced a circular pattern over her bare shoulder, then
ran his finger along her clavicle with a barely-there touch. He heard a soft hitch in her breathing, then she grabbed his tie and tugged until she could whisper in his ear. “Your new suit looks incredible on you,” she admitted, “but right now, I’m more interested in how quickly can I get you out of it.”

The Doctor barely managed to suppress a shiver as her hot breath fanned against his ear. “Shall I time you?” he suggested huskily, then scraped his teeth over her earlobe.

When she tilted her head back in a silent request for him to move his lips lower, he instead pulled back entirely, putting a bit of extra space between them. Rose glared at him, and he smiled innocently. “Just giving you room to work.”

She arched an eyebrow, and he felt the familiar swooping sensation that always coursed through him when she accepted his challenge. Then her right hand slid up his chest and around to the back of his neck, and his breathing shallowed in anticipation of her next move.

A moment later, he had to bite back a whimper when she brushed against the spot below his ear that always made him weak in the knees. Her thumb rubbed tiny circles, sending little bolts of electricity through his body. Despite the Doctor’s comment about giving her room to work, his hands landed on Rose’s hips and he tugged her closer, resting his forehead against hers.

A disappointed whine slipped out when Rose’s hand left his neck. Her practiced fingers got his tie out of the way in seconds, and she went after the buttons on his shirt. After undoing the top three buttons, she leaned forward and pressed a hot, open-mouthed kiss to his collarbone.

The Doctor sighed and felt Rose’s lips turn up in a smile. *Time to even things out a bit*, he thought. Once she had his shirt completely unbuttoned and untucked, he shrugged it off and tossed it over the back of a chair, followed by his vest.

Rose reached for his bare chest, but he caught her hands and drew them up around his neck. “My turn,” he whispered as he ran his hands down her arms and wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her closer.

“Thought I was supposed to be undressing you.”

“That was before you decided to tease me.”

oOoOoOoOo

Later, when the Doctor was putting on his new blue suit for the second time and Rose was putting mousse in her damp hair, she broached the topic of their current companion.

“I like Martha,” she said without equivocation as she fluffed her wavy hair, checking her reflection in the mirror for any product that hadn’t been worked in. “You said one alien planet, to see how she did — and she was brilliant.”

The Doctor sat down and put his shoes on. “Yes, she was,” he agreed.

“So…”

He tugged on his ear. “Thing is, I don’t know quite how to phrase the question to guarantee she says yes.”

Rose paused for a moment with her head partway through the opening of her new pink jumper to stare at him. He didn’t seem to be joking, and she shook her head, then tugged the top on the rest of the way.
“Normally, just extending the invitation is enough,” she pointed out drily.

“Donna wouldn’t have stayed, if we’d asked.”

“Donna had just watched her fiancé get eaten by a giant spider,” Rose countered. “She needed time to process everything that happened.”

“True…” The Doctor pulled on his suit jacket and buttoned the top two buttons. “Tell you what. Why don’t we suggest one more trip over breakfast, see what she thinks?”

He stuck his hands in his pockets and spun on his heel. Rose shook her head at him, but followed him out of their room.

oOoOoOoOo

When Martha woke up after a full eight hours of sleep, it took her a moment to remember where she was. The details came quickly, though—the Doctor and Rose, the TARDIS, meeting Shakespeare, going to New Earth. Wonder where we’ll go today, she thought as she bounced out of bed.

She’d showered the night before to rinse the grime from the exhaust fumes off her skin, so after washing her face and brushing her teeth, she started getting dressed. The underwear she’d hand washed before going to bed was hanging over the towel rack in the bathroom, and she was in the middle of slipping back into her jeans when her thoughts caught up with her. How long was this trip going to last? How long did she want it to last?

Once she’d finished dressing, Martha set off in search of the Doctor and Rose. Exiting her room, she looked up and down the corridor, trying to guess which way to go. Cocking her head, she heard voices off to her right, so she followed them. As she got closer, she smelled bacon frying and her stomach growled.

“Martha!” the Doctor exclaimed happily when she found them in the kitchen. “Good morning!”

“Morning, Doctor.” She glanced at the teabag hanging out of his cup, then looked at Rose. “I don’t suppose you have coffee?”

She smiled warmly and pointed to a cabinet. “Yeah, ‘course. Help yourself.”

Martha rummaged around for a moment, then emerged victorious with a can of coffee and a French press. Rose put the kettle back on and pulled yogurt out of the fridge while the Doctor reached up to the top shelf of the cupboard for granola. Martha made the toast while she waited for her coffee, and ten minutes later, they were all sitting around the table.

“We were thinking about taking one more trip before you go home,” the Doctor said as he slathered an unhealthy amount of marmalade over a slice of toast.

Martha’s heart jumped, but she forced herself to think for a moment. “I don’t think that’s what I want,” she said carefully. The Doctor and Rose both looked surprised, and she hurried to explain. “I don’t want to just be a guest tagging along. I love travelling with you, but if I stay, I want it to be permanent—at least until I go back to take my exams.”

To her surprise, both Rose and the Doctor grinned widely at that statement. “Brilliant!” the Doctor proclaimed. “We hoped you would, but I wasn’t sure how to ask.”

Rose rolled her eyes. “I did suggest he just try, ‘Martha, would you care to travel with us for a while?’ but apparently that was too straightforward for him.”
He sniffed and pointed his nose upward. “Yes, well… Martha’s staying, so that doesn’t matter now.”

Martha shook her head at this strange couple she was starting to consider friends. “So, where are we off to today, then?”

The Doctor beamed and little crinkles formed around his eyes. “I thought maybe Old New York, since we just visited New New York.”

Adrenaline rushed through Martha, and she barely stopped a squeal from escaping. “I’ve always wanted to go to New York. I mean the real New York, not the new, new, new, new, new one,” she said.

“Well then!” He raised his mug in a salute. “Let’s finish breakfast and get going!”

Martha’s excitement still hadn’t worn off when she watched the Doctor and Rose pilot the TARDIS. She knew she wouldn’t want this crazy life forever—she wasn’t letting go of her dream of being a doctor. But, if she could join them just for a bit, take sort of a gap year and see things no one else even knew existed, she couldn’t turn that down.

The landing was hard, and she looked at Rose. “He was flying again, wasn’t he?”

The Doctor shook his head and put his coat on. “Come on, ladies. We’re in New York, the city that never sleeps. No time to stand here… chinwagging.”

Martha and Rose laughed as they followed him out of the TARDIS. This time, unlike her previous two landings, they were on soft grass. The sun shone brightly in the clear blue sky, though they were parked in the shadow of a stone wall.

The Doctor tilted his head back and took a deep breath. “Ah, smell that Atlantic breeze. Nice and cold.”

“In fact I think I’ll grab my jacket,” Rose said, and walked right back inside. A moment later, Rose reappeared, wearing a black leather jacket.

“Are we ready then?” the Doctor asked. “Anything else you want to take care of before we go explore?”

The exasperation in his voice was obviously fake, and judging by the cheeky smile Rose shot him, she knew that as well as Martha did.

“No, I think I’m good. Thanks for asking though.”

The Doctor rolled his eyes, then nodded at something behind Martha and Rose. “Have you met my friend, ladies?”

Martha followed his gaze up along the wall, her jaw dropping when she saw one of the most iconic landmarks in the world. “Is that? Oh, my God. That’s the Statue of Liberty.”

“Gateway to the New World,” the Doctor said quietly. “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

“That’s so brilliant,” Martha breathed, squinting as the sun peeked around the torch arm and shone in her eyes. “So we’re really in New York City.”
The Doctor turned around and started towards the harbour. “Yep! The genuine article,” he said, nodding at the skyline. “So good, they named it twice. Mind you, it was New Amsterdam originally. Harder to say twice. No wonder it didn’t catch on. New Amsterdam, New Amsterdam.”

Rose cleared her throat and looked at him significantly. “Oh! Right!” The Doctor pulled something out of his pocket. “Before I forget, you’ll be needing this.”

He held it between his fingers, and Martha realised it was a key—a TARDIS key. “Are you serious?” she asked as she reached for it.

“Oh! Right!” Rose told her. “If you’re going to live with us for a while, you ought to be able to get inside, don’t you think?”

“Yes, of course! Thank you!” Martha slipped the key into her jeans pocket, making a mental note to get something more secure to keep it on later.

“So, we’re in New York City,” Rose said. “What year is it, Doctor?”

Martha looked out at the skyline. “Well, it has to be a while ago—because look, the Empire State Building’s not even finished yet.”

“Work in progress,” the Doctor said. “Still got a couple floors to go, and if I know my history, that makes the date somewhere around—”

“November first, 1930,” Rose said from behind them.

“You’re really learning to use your time senses, Rose,” the Doctor said as he turned around. “Oh.”

Martha glanced over her shoulder and shook her head when she spotted the paper in Rose’s hands. Then she looked back at the city—a city that was looking as vibrant and alive as it did in 2008.

“Eighty years ago,” she mused. “It’s funny, because you see those old newsreels all in black and white like it’s so far away, but here we are. It’s real. It’s now. Come on then.” She looked over at the Doctor and Rose. “Where do you want to go first?”

“I think our fun holiday just got a bit more serious,” the Doctor said soberly.

He held the newspaper up, and she read the headline out loud. “‘Hooverville Mystery Deepens.’ What’s Hooverville?”

“Tell you what,” Rose said, “let’s enjoy the ferry ride over to Manhattan, and then you can explain it to us, Doctor.”

He folded the paper up and stuck it inside his coat. “Well, come on then,” he said, taking her hand and leading them towards the pier.

The Doctor flashed his psychic paper at the young man collecting tickets at the gangplank to the ferry, and he let the three of them pass. “So what,” Martha said, keeping her voice low, “that thing makes people think you’ve given them money, too?”

“No!” he said indignantly. “It makes them think I don’t need to give them money.”

She furrowed her brows, uncertain if that was really any better.

“Think of it like this, Martha,” Rose suggested as the Doctor led the way to the front railing. “We’re likely going to fix something that’s gone wrong here, yeah? And we won’t ask to be paid for it. So
how much is a ferry ticket worth, then?"

The Doctor, meanwhile, had found the perfect spot on the bow of the ship. He let Rose and Martha stand right against the railing, then he stood behind Rose and wrapped his arms around her waist.

The ferry started, and the movement of the boat and a stiff Atlantic breeze sent a slight spray of seawater up into the air. He closed his eyes and breathed in, relishing the salty tang.

“Look at that city,” he told Rose and Martha as they came up on it. “You know, the Dutch purchased Manhattan Island from the Native Americans for roughly $1050 dollars, in modern US currency… which makes it…” He pressed his tongue to the back of his teeth. “Oooh, about 600 pounds. Roughly.”

“You’re kidding me,” Martha said.

“Nope,” he said, popping the p.

“They paid an entire tribe less than a month’s wages for that piece of land?”

The Doctor grimaced. “Sadly, that is neither the first nor the last instance of European settlers taking advantage of the native people.”

They were silent for a minute, then he quickly shifted gears. “Anyway! That’s why it was called New Amsterdam at first. Then you English conquered the Dutch colony of New Netherlands in 1664 and renamed it New York, after the Duke of York—the future King James II.”

“He’s the one who was deposed, right?” Rose asked.

The Doctor nodded. “One of them, yes. The city was called New Orange for a year or so when the Dutch regained control, but otherwise, it’s been New York ever since.”

When the ferry docked, the Doctor hailed a cab, and in relatively short order, they arrived at Central Park. “This way,” he said, setting off down a path. A few brown and yellow leaves covered the pavement, crunching beneath their feet as they walked.

“Right, so back to Hooverville,” the Doctor said. “Herbert Hoover, thirty-first President of the USA, came to power a year ago. Up till then New York was a boom town, the Roaring Twenties, and then —”

“The Wall Street Crash,” Rose said. “That was almost exactly a year ago, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. Whole economy, wiped out overnight. Thousands of people unemployed. All of a sudden, the huddled masses doubled in number with nowhere to go.” A cyclist rang his bell and rode by them. “So, they ended up here in Central Park.”

“What, they actually live in the park?” Martha asked disbelievingly. “In the middle of the city?”

“It happens in London too, Martha,” Rose said before the Doctor could answer. “Ordinary people—good people—they lose their jobs. They can’t pay the rent and they lose everything.”

The Doctor studied her for a moment. Something about the conversation had stirred a memory, but she’d locked it away before he could see it. He made a note to come back and ask her about that later, but they had reached the first shanties at the edge of Hooverville, so he let it go for the moment.

“There are places like this all over America,” the Doctor explained. Poor people, dressed in as many
layers as they could to keep warm, watched them warily as they walked through the makeshift city. “No one’s helping them. You only come to Hooverville when there’s nowhere else to go.”

Shouts and the sound of fists hitting flesh broke the stillness of Hooverville, and the Doctor picked up his pace. “He stole my bread!” a man shouted as they turned a corner.

“That’s enough!” a deeper voice ordered. “Did you take it?”

“I don’t know what happened,” a third voice said. “He just went crazy.”

When they slipped around washing that was hanging across the path, they could see a black man in a camel-coloured coat and weatherbeaten hat looking at two younger men, one black and one white.

“That’s enough!” the older man repeated, then looked at the white man. “Now, think real careful before you lie to me.”

A few seconds later, the defiance on the accused thief’s face crumbled. “I’m starving, Solomon.”

The Doctor, Rose, and Martha stopped and watched the rest of the drama play out. Solomon held out his hand to the thief, and he reluctantly pulled a loaf of bread from the inside of his coat.

“We all starving,” Solomon said. “We all got families somewhere.”

He tore the loaf in two and gave a half to each man. The Doctor’s eyebrow quirked up when he recognised the similarity to the test the biblical Solomon had used on the two mothers who each claimed the living child belonged to her.

“No stealing and no fighting,” Solomon commanded, looking at each man in turn. “You know the rules. Thirteen years ago I fought in the Great War. A lot of us did. And the only reason we got through was because we stuck together. No matter how bad things get, we still act like human beings. It’s all we got.”

The two men looked at each other and slunk off in opposite directions, and the crowd that had gathered to watch the fight and subsequent judgement dispersed.

The Doctor gestured for Rose and Martha to follow him, then walked towards Solomon before he could get away. “I suppose that makes you the boss around here,” he said.

Solomon turned around and looked at the three of them bemusedly. “And, er, who might you be?”

Rose took a half step forward. “I’m Rose, and this is my husband, the Doctor.” She shifted slightly, pointing to Martha. “And that’s our friend, Martha.”

Speculation and grim humour lit Solomon’s eyes. “A doctor. Huh. Well, we got stockbrokers, we got a lawyer,” he said, nodding towards two men respectively, “but you’re the first doctor. Neighbourhood gets classier by the day.” He held his hands out over a fire, trying to get warm.

“How many people live here?” asked Martha, and the Doctor could tell she still couldn’t quite believe people were forced to live in circumstances like this.

Solomon could hear the incredulity in her voice as well, and he smiled wryly at her. “At any one time, hundreds. No place else to go. But I will say this about Hooverville,” he said, looking around his community. “We are a truly equal society. Black, white, all the same. All starving. So you’re welcome, all of you.”
He frowned, and lines formed around his eyes. “But tell me. Doctor, you’re a man of learning, right? Explain this to me.” He led them to where the Empire State Building peeked through a gap in the trees. “That there’s going to be the tallest building in the world. How come they can do that, when we got people starving in the heart of Manhattan?”

The Doctor looked at the nearly complete skyscraper, then at the frustrated man. Solomon knew the answer as well as he did—greed, pure and simple.

“I wish I could explain why people do things like that,” the Doctor said quietly. “Why human life is valued less than the ability to make more money.” Solomon started back the way they’d come, and the Doctor, Rose, and Martha all followed. “But no matter how long I live, I think that’s one thing I’ll never completely understand.”

“So Doctor,” Solomon said as they walked through the streets of Hooverville, “what happened to bring you here, if you don’t mind my asking? I reckon that people still get sick, so how did a doctor end up so down-and-out that he had to come here?”

“Ah, yeah…” The Doctor rubbed at the back of his neck. “Then what are you doing here? I don’t exactly think Hooverville is on the list of places tourists regularly hit.” He stopped at a tent. “This here is my place,” he said, then picked up the coffee pot sitting over the fire and tossed the cold coffee out.

“We sort of… travel, and investigate things. And when we arrived in New York City, I happened to spot a headline…” The Doctor pulled the newspaper out of his pocket and held it up, and comprehension dawned on the other man’s face. “So, men are going missing. Is this true?”

Solomon took the paper. “It’s true all right.”

He tipped his head toward the tent, and the Doctor followed after him when he stepped inside. “But what does missing mean?” he asked from the entrance to the tent. “Men must come and go here all the time. It’s not like anyone’s keeping a register.”

He felt a sharp wave of disapproval from Rose and looked over his shoulder at her.

“Someone takes them, at night,” Solomon said after a moment. “We hear something, someone calls out for help. By the time we get there, they gone… like they vanished into thin air.”

“And you’re sure someone’s taking them?” the Doctor asked, trying for a respectful tone to avoid upsetting Rose again.

But she spoke up before Solomon could. “They leave their stuff behind, don’t they?”

Solomon nodded. “That’s right.” He looked at the Doctor and Martha. “When you got next to nothing, you hold on to the little you got. Your knife, blanket, you take it with you. You don’t leave bread uneaten, fire still burning.”
“Have you been to the police?” Martha questioned sympathetically.

The Doctor read the answer in Solomon’s frustrated body language before he spoke. “Yeah, we tried that. Another deadbeat goes missing, big deal.”

The Doctor tugged on his ear. “So the question is, who’s taking them and what for?”

“Solomon!” A young man stuck his head inside the tent. “Solomon, Mr. Diagoras is here.” Solomon grabbed his hat and left the tent, and the Doctor, Rose, and Martha followed him.

A well-dressed businessman standing on a crate was gathering a crowd. The Doctor let Martha get a few steps ahead of him and Rose, then slipped his hand into Rose’s. *Want to tell me about it?*

She looked up at him. *One of my schoolmates was homeless,* she told him. *Good people, but one month they were a few days behind on the rent, and…*

He could feel the fear then, could tell how many times Jackie had barely made the rent when Rose was a child, and the impression that constant fear of living on the street had left on her. He could also tell she really didn’t want to talk about it, so he just squeezed her hand and walked with her to the front of the crowd, to stand beside Solomon and Martha.

Up close, there was something a little too polished, a little too oiled, about Mr. Diagoras. “I need men,” he said. “Volunteers. I’ve got a little work for you and you sure look like you can use the money.”

The Doctor’s suspicions were roused already. Anyone so obviously playing on people’s desperation was not to be trusted.

“Yeah. What is the money?” asked the young man who’d told them Diagoras was here.

“A dollar a day.”

“What’s the work?” Solomon asked, and the men around him murmured their agreement.

“A little trip down the sewers,” Diagoras said casually. The crowd started grumbling, and he raised his voice to carry over them. “Got a tunnel collapsed needs clearing and fixing. Any takers?”

“A dollar a day? That’s slave wage,” Solomon said, getting more agreement. “And men don’t always come back up, do they?”

Diagoras shrugged insouciantly. “Accidents happen.”

“What do you mean?” Rose asked sharply. “What sort of accidents?”

Diagoras looked her up and down, and the Doctor wrapped an arm around her and glared at him. Diagoras smirked. “I don’t think you need the work, doll. Anybody else?”

The Doctor and Rose raised their hands, and Diagoras knit his brows together. “Enough with the questions.”

“Oh, no, no, no,” the Doctor clarified. “We’re volunteering.”

Martha looked at them, her jaw set, but she raised her hand, too. “I’ll kill you for this,” she muttered out of the corner of her mouth.

The Doctor chuckled.
Diagoras nodded, then looked at the rest of the crowd. “Anybody else?”

The same young man raised his hand, and then finally, reluctantly, so did Solomon.

The New York sewers were everything fiction had led Rose to think they would be: dark, dank, and slimy. She grimaced when she dropped off the ladder and landed with a slight splash; she could already feel the hem of her trousers dangling in the puddle. More water trickled down the walls of the tunnel, creating a constant background noise of running water.

The skin on the back of her neck pricked, and she glanced behind her to see Diagoras leering at her. *Speaking of slimy*… The Doctor tightened his hold on her hand, and for once she didn’t mind his overprotective streak.

Twisted amusement glinted in Diagoras’ eyes. He handed everyone a torch, then nodded down the tunnel. “Turn left. Go about a half a mile. Follow tunnel two seven three. Fall’s right ahead of you, you can’t miss it.”

“And when do we get our dollar?” asked the young man, who’d introduced himself as Frank on the walk over.

All the amusement left Diagoras’ face when he looked at Frank. “When you come back up,” he said flatly.

“And if we don’t come back up?” the Doctor asked.

“They got no one to pay,” Diagoras told them, and a shiver went through Rose.

“Don’t worry,” Solomon said, “we’ll be back.”

“Let’s hope so,” Martha said under her breath. She followed Solomon down the tunnel, with Frank right behind her, leaving Rose and the Doctor alone with Diagoras.

The Doctor stared at the businessman, but he didn’t blink. After a moment, Diagoras turned around and the Doctor and Rose followed their companions deeper into the sewers.

The Doctor’s arm hung rigidly at his side, not swinging easily the way it usually did. Rose let go of his hand and took his arm instead, giving him the physical closeness she could tell he needed.

He sighed, and the muscles in his arm relaxed. *I didn’t like the way he looked at you.*

*I didn’t like the way he talked about not having to pay us,* Rose countered, redirecting his focus.

*That too.*

Rose took his hand again and brushed her thumb over his knuckles until she felt the rest of the tension ease out of his body. *Come on,* she said then, speeding up slightly. *Let’s catch up with the others.*

Frank and Martha stood aside when they heard them coming. “There’s a whole lot of runaways in the camp,” he told Martha as they passed, “younger than me, from all over. Missouri, Oklahoma, Texas. Solomon keeps a lookout for us.”

They were walking abreast with Solomon now, and Rose looked over at him when she heard Frank. He’d gained the respect of the entire camp, and he took care of the younger runaways in the group—
he was a good man.

“So, what about you?” Frank asked Martha. “You’re a long way from home.”

Rose snorted—he didn’t know the half of it.

“I was just finishing school when I met the Doctor and Rose, and they asked me if I wanted to travel with them,” Martha said. “I thought… sure, take a break and see some of the world before real life sets in.”

The Doctor looked over at Solomon. “So this Diagoras bloke, who is he then?”

“A couple of months ago, he was just another foreman. Now, it seems like he’s running most of Manhattan.”

“How’d he manage that, then?” Rose asked as they turned another corner.

“These are strange times,” Solomon said. “A man can go from being king of the hill to the lowest of the low overnight. It’s just for some folks, it works the other way round.”

The Doctor directed his torch at the ground, and an eerie green light filled the tunnel. “Whoa!” They all stopped to look down at what looked like a neon green jellyfish lying on the ground.

Martha squatted down and pointed her torch at it. “Is it radioactive or something?” When the Doctor crouched down right in front of her, she went around to Rose’s side. A sour odour wafted up to them, and both women covered their noses. “It’s gone off, whatever it is. And you’ve got to pick it up,” she muttered to the Doctor as he took it into his hands.

He brought it to his nose, and Martha nearly gagged again. “Oh, Martha,” Rose said, suppressed laughter in her voice, “just be glad he isn’t tasting it.”

“Shine your torch through it,” he murmured to Rose. The blob glowed green again, but this time, Rose could see the faint lines where it looked like smaller bits had been sewn together to create one larger creature. “Composite organic matter,” the Doctor said, confirming her hypothesis. He glanced at their friend. “Martha? Medical opinion?”

She lowered the hand covering her mouth and leaned forward, just barely. “It’s not human. I know that.”

Rose felt the atmosphere in the tunnel shift slightly, and realised they were making the two Americans curious.

“No, it’s not,” the Doctor agreed. Then he stood up and looked back the way they’d come. “And I’ll tell you something else. We must be at least half a mile in. I don’t see any sign of a collapse, do you?” Everyone shone their torches around the tunnel, revealing solid walls and ceilings. “So why did Mr. Diagoras send us down here?”

“Where are we now?” Martha asked. “What’s above us?”

“Well,” the Doctor said, looking up, “we’re right underneath Manhattan.”

Solomon stalked down the tunnel, and the other four followed him. “We’re way beyond half a mile. There’s no collapse, nothing.”

“That Diagoras bloke, was he lying?” Martha asked.
The Doctor’s hand tightened reflexively at the mention of the overseer’s name. “Looks like it.”

Frank asked the question that was on everyone’s mind. “So why’d he want people to come down here?”

Rose could easily tell how much the Doctor wanted to ask her to go back to safety. Given the situation, she wouldn’t even have minded the suggestion, as long as he accepted her refusal. But instead, he drew a deep breath and squeezed her hand tight before half-turning to face Solomon.

“Solomon, I think it’s time you two went back. Unless I’m wrong, this is more up my alley than yours.”

Squeals echoed through the tunnel, and the group looked at each other nervously. That sounded like a pig, Doctor, Rose said.

“What the hell was that?” Solomon said when they heard more squeals coming from another direction.

“Hello?” Frank shouted, drawing shushes and whispers of his name from Martha and Solomon. “What if it’s one of the folk gone missing?” he said, but quieter. “You’d be scared and half mad down here on your own.”

“Do you think they’re still alive?” the Doctor asked, and Rose was glad he sounded curious, rather than pitying.

“ Heck, we ain’t seen no bodies down here,” Frank said, and Rose couldn’t argue with that logic. “Maybe they just got lost.”

More squeals echoed through the sewer, and Solomon said, “I know I never heard nobody make a sound like that.”

“Where’s it coming from?” Frank whispered. “Sounds like there’s more than one of them.”

“This way.”

The Doctor took a step, but Solomon’s voice stopped him.

“No, that way.” He shone his torch on a figure hunched over in the shadows.

It was still almost too dark to see what it was, but Rose put the shape together with the squeals and thought she knew. She nearly dropped her torch, and she put it in her other hand and wiped her sweaty palm on her trousers.

“Doctor?” Martha whispered.

“Who are you?” Solomon asked.

The creature didn’t move, and Frank tried again. “Are you lost? Can you understand me?” There was a quiver in his voice, and the Doctor looked over at him. “I’ve been thinking about folk lost down—”

“It’s all right, Frank.” The Doctor held up a hand, and the young man stopped. “Just stay back. Let me have a look.”

Rose stood by Martha while the Doctor slowly walked towards the shadow, talking to it in soothing tones. “He’s got a point, though, my mate Frank. I’d hate to be stuck down here on my own. We
know the way out. Daylight. If you come with us…”

She felt his surprise a moment before he pointed the torch at the creature’s face. The man was a pig, just like Rose had suspected.

“Oh, but what are you?” the Doctor asked.

Solomon cleared his throat and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “Is that, er, some kind of carnival mask?”

“No, it’s real,” the Doctor told him.

The pig grunted, and the Doctor looked back at it. “I’m sorry. Now listen to me. I promise I can help. Who did this to you?”

Shadows on the wall caught Rose’s eye, and when more pigs turned the corner, she called out to him. “I think it’s time for us to go, Doctor.” He stood slowly, but didn’t move as the pigs stalked him. “Doctor!”

“Actually, good point.” The Doctor backed away from the pigs, but they didn’t stop moving.

“They’re following you,” Martha said unnecessarily.

“Yeah, I noticed that, thanks.” He reached the rest of the group, and the pigs started covering the ground between them. “Well then, Rose, Martha, Frank, Solomon.”

“What?” Martha cried.

“Run!” Rose shouted, and they all spun around and ran down the tunnels.

Squeals echoed behind them, getting closer. Losing the pigs in the tunnels would be impossible, the Doctor realised—this was their territory.

They reached a junction, and Martha froze. “Where are we going?!?” she screeched.

The Doctor ran past her, Rose right behind him. “This way!” he ordered, taking the turn.

As they ran through another junction, he caught a glimpse of something out of the corner of his eye. Light from above, and…

He skidded to a halt and spun around, breathing a sigh of relief when he saw a way out. “It’s a ladder! Come on!”

He pulled the sonic screwdriver out of his pocket as he climbed the ladder and used it to open the manhole cover. Hopping out of the sewer, he turned to offer a hand to Rose first, then Martha.

Down in the tunnel, he could hear Solomon calling for Frank. The older man backed up towards the ladder, his gaze focused on where Frank was presumably doing something heroic and dangerous.

After Solomon lifted himself up into the room, the squeals from the pigs grew angrier. Frank finally started climbing the ladder, and the Doctor and Solomon both bent down to give him a hand.

“C’mon, Frank! C’mon!” Solomon said urgently.

Frank was halfway up the ladder when the pigs wrapped their arms around his legs. The Doctor grabbed his wrist and strained against their pull. “I’ve got you. C’mon! Come on!”
The pigs put their full weight behind dragging Frank down into the tunnel, and his hand slipped out of the Doctor’s grasp.

“Frank!” yelled Solomon.

The Doctor stared in horror as the young man was dragged away. “No!”

One of the pigs started climbing the ladder. Solomon shoved the Doctor away from the sewer and slammed the lid shut. “We can’t go after him.”

The Doctor clawed at the cover, trying to open it again. “We’ve got to go back down. We can’t just leave him.”

Solomon pushed the Doctor away and stood on the manhole cover. “No, I’m not losing anybody else.”

Those words broke through the Doctor’s agitation, and he glanced over at Rose and Martha. His bond mate and their companion. How did their safety rate against Frank’s life?

“Those creatures were from Hell. From Hell itself! If we go after them, they’ll take us all! There’s nothing we can do. I’m sorry.”

Before the Doctor could decide if he wanted to argue with that, or if he should be grateful to the man for keeping Rose and Martha safe, a new voice took them all by surprise.

“All right, then. Put them up.” The Doctor, Rose, Martha, and Solomon all turned slowly to look at a young, blonde woman holding a revolver. The Doctor stared at her, hardly believing his eyes. But when she waved the revolver and pointed it at him, he realised this was real. “Hands in the air and no funny business. Now tell me, you schmucks, what have you done with Laszlo?”

“Who’s Laszlo?” Martha asked.

The woman narrowed her eyes. “You don’t know?”

The Doctor shook his head. “Not a clue.”

“Right.” Uncertainty crossed her face, and the weapon faltered. However, she quickly raised it again when Rose took a step towards her. “Oh no you don’t,” she ordered. “You can come with me. You might not know who Laszlo is, but you don’t belong in the props room.”

They were led down a narrow corridor to a dressing room. Inside, the woman sat at the vanity and put makeup on with one hand, while still holding a gun on them with the other.

“Laszlo’s my boyfriend,” she explained. “Or was my boyfriend until he disappeared two weeks ago. No letter, no goodbye, no nothing.”

She gestured wildly with the gun while she talked, and the Doctor shifted so he was standing between this girl and Rose.

“And I’m not stupid,” she said rapidly. “I know some guys are just pigs but not my Laszlo. I mean, what kind of guy asks you to meet his mother before he vamooses?” she asked, waving the gun at them again.

“Yeah. It might, might just help if you put that down,” the Doctor ordered, pointing to a little table.

“Huh?” Her mouth hung open and she looked at the gun like she’d forgotten she was holding it, then
rolled her eyes. “Oh, sure.” Everyone jumped when she tossed it down onto a pile of tulle and satin. “Oh, come on. It’s not real. It’s just a prop. It was either that or a spear.”

“What do you think happened to Laszlo?” Martha asked, obviously thinking the same thing they all were—another missing man, that couldn’t be a coincidence.

“I wish I knew.” The woman tossed her makeup back down on the vanity. “One minute he’s there, the next, zip. Vanished.”

The Doctor took a step towards her. “Listen, ah—what’s your name?”

She looked up at him, her expression cool. “Tallulah.”

“Tallulah.”

“Three Ls and an H,” she added before the Doctor could get a word in.

He blinked down at her. “Right. We can try to find Laszlo, but he’s not the only one. There are people disappearing every night.”

“And there are creatures,” Solomon added. “Such creatures.”

Tallulah looked around the Doctor to stare at Solomon. “What do you mean, creatures?” she asked suspiciously.

“Look, listen, just trust me. Everyone is in danger.” The Doctor reached into his pocket and retrieved the thing they’d found in the tunnels. “I need to find out exactly what this is. Because then I’ll know exactly what we’re fighting.”

Tallulah recoiled. “Yuck.”

“That room we were in, you said that was the props room?” he asked. She nodded. “I think you’d probably have everything I need in there, if I could go back.”

“As long as you take that thing with you, you can go wherever you want,” she said, her nose still wrinkled in disgust.
Why They Changed It...

Chapter Notes

You might have noticed the chapter titles in this section are all taken from the song "Istanbul (Not Constantinople)" by They Might Be Giants. Using the first line of the Old New York/New Amsterdam verse for the first chapter was originally to contrast Old New York with New New York. Then I remembered the rest of the lines in that verse... and how they're all basically, "Don't ask me why they changed it!" which is basically how I feel about the whole concept of human Daleks.

Rose wanted to laugh at the expression on Tallulah’s face, but really, the creature they’d found in the tunnels was disgusting.

“Molto bene!” the Doctor exclaimed, beaming down at Tallulah.

He spun around to face Rose, but she shook her head slightly. *I might learn something more about Laszlo and the others being taken, if I stay.*

The lines around his mouth tightened, but he nodded in agreement. “Stay safe,” he whispered as he pressed a kiss to her forehead.

“Solomon, I could use some help,” he said, and the man nodded, following him back into the hallway.

“Can you girls give me a minute to get changed into my costume?” Tallulah asked. “I’ve got a show starting in thirty, and I need to get ready.”

Rose and Martha stepped outside her dressing room and pulled the door shut. “So,” Martha said, “what do you think is behind this?”

Rose shook her head. “I honestly don’t know. My gut says it’s bad though—really bad.”

“Of course it is,” Martha said. “I’m not complaining, but do you and the Doctor ever manage to go someplace where there isn’t a dire emergency?”

“Oh yeah!” Rose laughed. “I know you’re four for four, but really Martha, trouble’s just the bits in between.” Her smile faded when she remembered where she’d picked that phrase up from.

“What is it?” Martha asked.

“The Doctor told my mum that once. Last year, after Christmas—the one with the big ship over London, not the Christmas star.”

Martha raised an eyebrow. “Those were both you and the Doctor, weren’t they?”

“Might have been,” Rose said, feeling her good humour return.

The door opened, and Tallulah let them back in, now wearing a white dress. She sat down in front of the mirror and finished putting on her makeup and jewellery, while Rose and Martha stood behind
“Tell us about Laszlo,” Rose requested.

Tallulah smiled; clearly, this was a favourite subject of hers. “Laszlo. He’d wait for me after the show. Walk me home like I was a lady.” She struggled a bit to get an earring in, but she kept talking. “He’d leave a flower for me on my dressing table. Every day, just a single rose bud.”

“What have you reported him missing?” Rose asked.

Tallulah huffed, and Rose knew what that meant. “Sure. He’s just a stagehand. Who cares? The management certainly don’t.”

Martha picked up a wire halo from the shelves and played with it. “Can’t you kick up a fuss or something?” she asked Talulah.

“Not if she wants to keep her job,” Rose said, remembering all the times she’d held her tongue while working at Henrik’s, because she knew she’d get fired if they thought she was too difficult.

Tallulah nodded, but Martha still didn’t understand. “But they’d listen to you,” she cajoled. “You’re one of the stars.”

Rose met Tallulah’s eyes in the mirror, and they both smiled ruefully. “Oh, honey,” Tallulah said, “I got one song in a back street revue and that’s only because Heidi Chicane broke her ankle.” She turned away from the mirror and glared up at Martha. “Which had nothing to do with me, whatever anybody says.” She sighed, and some of the fight went out of her. “I can’t afford to make a fuss. If I don’t make this month’s rent, then before you know it, I’m in Hooverville.”

“Okay, I get it,” Martha said impatiently, but Rose knew she didn’t, not really. She didn’t know what it was like to live hand-to-mouth, to wonder if there would be enough money for rent and bills and food.

“It’s the Depression, sweetie,” Tallulah said, matter-of-factly. “Your heart might break, but the show goes on. Because if it stops, you starve.” She stood up and looked at Martha. “Every night I have to go out there, sing, dance, keep going, hoping he’s going to come back.”

She started crying, and Martha wrapped her arms around her. “I’m sorry,” she said sincerely.

Tallulah pulled out of the hug and looked at Rose. “Hey, you’re lucky, though. I saw the way that hot potato in the sharp suit looked at you—like you’re his whole world.”

Rose felt the steady presence of the Doctor in her mind. “Yeah, I am lucky,” she agreed.

“How long have you been married?”

Martha grinned, clearly expecting the precise answer they’d given her, but Rose shook her head. “Almost seven months,” she said instead.

“Oh, I thought you were newlyweds!” Tallulah crowed while pulling on a pair of fake wings. “The way he didn’t want to leave you earlier… I told myself, they haven’t even been married for a year yet.”

Her face fell a little. “I’d hoped me and Laszlo…” She sighed. “But hope is the only thing that’s kept me going because, well, look. On my dressing table every day still.” She picked up a white rosebud and handed it to Martha.
“You think it’s Laszlo?” Martha asked.

She shook her head quickly. “I don’t know. If he’s still around, why is he being all secret like he doesn’t want me to see him?”

Rose nodded slowly. That was the question of the hour.

An uneasy feeling settled in the Doctor’s gut when he left Rose behind, but her idea of talking to Tallulah was a good one, and he needed to figure out who exactly was behind this. To do that, he needed to build a DNA scanner and he couldn’t do that in Tallulah’s dressing room.

“So what exactly are we doing, Doctor?” Solomon asked as they entered the props room.

The Doctor shucked his coat and tossed it over a rack. “I need to figure out where this thing came from,” he said, holding the green blob up. “That should tell me a little more about what’s going on here.”

“And then you’ll be able to find the missing people?”

“Hopefully.”

“So how can I help?”

The Doctor was already pulling random bits of hardware off of props. “I need a radio—a working one. Can you look through everything and find one?”

Solomon looked around the storage room. “I’ll poke around the rest of the theatre. I don’t think there’s anything back here.”

The Doctor was already so intent on what he was doing that he barely muttered a goodbye to Solomon.

Five minutes later, Solomon returned. “How about this?” he asked, holding up a small radio. “I found it backstage.”

“How about you, Doctor? Where are you from? I’ve been all over. I never heard anybody talk like you. Just exactly who are you?”

The Doctor didn’t look Solomon in the eye, brushing his question off instead. “Oh, I’m just sort of passing by.”

“I’m not a fool, Doctor,” Solomon said severely.

The Doctor looked at him then. “No. Sorry.”

Solomon walked over to the sewer entrance and stared at it. “I was so scared, Doctor. I let them take Frank because I was just so scared.”

There was something in his eyes requesting absolution, but the Doctor couldn’t give it. After a
moment, Solomon nodded and pulled his coat tighter around himself.

“I got to get back to Hooverville,” he said, walking towards the door. “With these creatures on the loose, we got to protect ourselves. Ain’t no one else going to help us.”

“Good luck.”

Solomon stopped and looked back at the Doctor. “I hope you find what you’re looking for, for all our sakes.”

Faint strains of music floated into the backstage area, and Tallulah fluttered out into the hallway.

“Girls, it’s showtime!” she called out, a wide smile on her face.

A group of dancers dressed in red sequinned costumes pranced down the hallway. “Lois, you spoil my chassé tonight, I’m going to punch you,” one said, casting a sidelong glance another another dancer.

Lois rolled her eyes. “Aw, quick complaining, Myrna. Go buy yourself some glasses.”

Tallulah waved at Rose and Martha. “Come on, girls. Take a look. Ever been on stage before?”

“Oh, a little bit,” Martha said, sharing an amused look with Rose. “You know, Shakespeare.”

“How dull is that?” Tallulah exclaimed. “Come and see a real show.”

She dragged them to a spot just behind the curtain, then got into position, standing behind the line of girls in red, hidden from view by their fans. Onstage, the master of ceremonies was announcing the act, and then it was showtime.

The curtains opened and the music started, and one by one the girls pulled back their fans, revealing Tallulah standing near the back of the stage. The crowd cheered loudly when she looked up at them through lowered lashes, then sauntered towards the front of the stage and started singing.

*How are you doing, love?* the Doctor asked, pulling her attention away from the show.

*Okay. I hope we can find Laszlo for Tallulah—she’s really broken up over it.*

*Working on getting more information right now.*

Martha poked Rose in the shoulder and pointed to the wings on the other side of the stage. Hiding in the shadows was… Rose blinked, but the figure didn’t disappear. It was definitely one of the pig men. Martha jerked her head, and Rose nodded.

*Yeah… I’m following up a lead too,* she told the Doctor as they started creeping across the stage, hiding behind the chorus girls as best as they could. (They weren’t doing a very good job, she had to admit, but there wasn’t anything else to do.)

*Be careful,* he admonished her.

Tallulah, Myrna, and Lois all squawked at them as they stepped on their costumes and nearly knocked them over. Rose winced, hoping they weren’t going to get Tallulah fired, but they couldn’t let that pig man get away.

*You know me,* she told the Doctor cheekily in answer to his request.
I do—that’s why I worry.

Affection for the Doctor brought a smile to Rose’s face. Then the pig man spotted them and started running, and she let her connection with the Doctor drift into the background.

The Doctor needed just one more thing to get his DNA scan to work—heat. And the best source of heat in a theatre was the lights, so he took the blob and the scanner up to the lighting gallery and pointed a spotlight directly at it.

“That’s it,” he said as he turned the light on. “We need to heat you up.”

He got down on the floor next to his gizmo and pulled out his glasses to get a better look, adjusting the position of the sonic when he could tell it wasn’t pointing at exactly the right spot.

“This is artificial,” the Doctor muttered when the first results came in. He tweaked one of the controls so he could get a more precise reading, and sat back on his heels.

An announcer introduced the next show, but the Doctor was too busy with his DNA scan to pay any attention.

The sonic started giving more information. “Genetically engineered. Whoever this is, oh, you’re clever.”

The noise from the theatre got a little bit louder when the show started, and the Doctor looked down, momentarily distracted. How are you doing, love? he asked, checking in with Rose.

Okay, I hope we can find Laszlo for Tallulah—she’s really broken up over it.

Working on getting more information right now.

He could feel her sudden distraction and was unsurprised when she said, Yeah... I’m following up a lead too.

The Doctor frowned—that feeling in his gut was back, stronger than before. Be careful.

You know me.

He smiled wryly. I do—that’s why I worry.

She laughed, then faded back into the constant presence in the back of his mind, letting the Doctor focus on his readings again.

The sonic beeped, indicating it was ready, and the Doctor pulled his stethoscope out of his pocket and listened to the results. “Fundamental DNA type four six seven dash nine eight nine.” He removed the earpieces and leaned back, trying to place that number—it sounded so familiar. “Nine eight nine,” he repeated, rubbing at his eyes. “Hold on, that means planet of origin…” The answer came to him, and his stomach clenched. “Skaro.”

The audience was roaring over the onstage disaster, but Tallulah wasn’t amused. “Get off the stage. You’re spoiling it!”

“But look. Over there!” Martha pointed. From this close, Rose could see this one was different.
There were still some human qualities to the face.

Tallulah screamed when she saw the pig man, and it ran away.

Martha gave chase immediately, while Rose turned and smiled apologetically at Tallulah. “Sorry about this. Uh… good luck?” she muttered, before darting into the wings.

She was just in time to see Martha run through a door and turn right. “Wait!” Martha cried out, then started running again.

The worry that had lingered in the back of the Doctor’s mind ever since they’d walked through the tunnels exploded into panic. Rose had a split second decision to make: Martha was too far ahead of her to stop. She knew the Doctor wanted her to stay safe, but she couldn’t let Martha go after it alone. In the end, it wasn’t a decision at all.

She had just stepped into the hallway when the Doctor’s frantic worry was finally put into words. *Rose, they’re Daleks!*

She stopped dead in her tracks for just a moment, then she realised that if there were Daleks roaming the sewers, she definitely couldn’t let Martha go alone. Taking a deep breath, she followed her friend into the props room.

Martha was standing still, trying to catch her breath, and Rose took her chance. “Martha, we’ve got to get out of here,” she said urgently.

“But that one was different, you saw!”

“I know. But the pig men aren’t the real problem, and the real problem is… We’ve got to get out of here, Martha!”

She heard the grunt behind her a second too late to avoid being grabbed. When the cloven hooves grabbed onto their arms, Martha screamed out loud and Rose called for her Doctor.

The Doctor ran towards Rose, desperate to get to her before she ran straight into the plunger arm of a Dalek. *Rose, they’re Daleks!* he told her, hoping to get her to stop. Instead, he got the distinct feeling that the information had convinced her to go into the tunnels, but why… *Oh. Because Martha went first.*

A crowd of showgirls was standing in the middle of the hallway gossiping. The Doctor ran through them, following his bond with Rose.

“Hey! What are you doing?” Tallulah called out.

“I have to save Rose!” he shouted back at her.

A scream echoed down the hallway from the props room, but Rose’s telepathic cry terrified the Doctor even more. “Rose!” he hollered, running faster.

Inside the props room, the manhole cover was ajar. The Doctor grabbed his coat and shoved his arms into the sleeves.

Unexpectedly, Tallulah showed up right behind him. “Where are you going?” she asked.

“They’ve taken them,” he growled, then pushed the manhole cover aside and started down the
“Who’s taken them?” Tallulah demanded. “What’re you doing? I said, what the hell are you doing?”

The Doctor had hoped Tallulah would go away if he ignored her, but instead, he heard her dress shoes clicking on the rungs of the ladder. He watched incredulously as the hem of a fur coat appeared, and then Tallulah’s face.

“No, no, no, no, no way. You’re not coming.”

“Tell me what’s going on.”

The Doctor raked his hands through his hair. Every moment he spent talking to Tallulah was one he wasn’t looking for Rose and Martha. “There’s nothing you can do. Go back,” he ordered.

But the showgirl met his gaze without blinking. “Look, whoever’s taken Rose and Martha, they could’ve taken Laszlo, couldn’t they?”

“Tallulah, you’re not safe down here,” he told her in a low voice.

“Then that’s my problem.” She lifted her chin. “Come on. Which way?”

She started walking in the wrong direction, and the Doctor gave up, taking off in Rose’s direction. “This way,” he told her, and a second later, he heard her footsteps behind him.

In the sewer tunnels, Martha looked over at Rose. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

Rose tilted her head. “What for?”

“You’re only down here because of me. You tried to get me to stop.”

“That’s not your fault,” Rose said, but Martha didn’t believe it. “Honestly, Martha,” she said seriously, “now that I know what we’re facing, there was no way we were ever going to get through this without being in danger at some point.”

The pig men holding onto Martha’s arms jerked at her and dragged her faster through the tunnels, and she panicked. “No! Let me go!” she demanded, squirming against their tight hold.

She and Rose were shoved up against the wall, and Martha winced at the sting in her wrist. Beside her, Rose grunted slightly, and Martha guessed she’d been hurt, too. The pig man grunted in Martha’s face while she held the joint, massaging it to ease the pain.

A line of men was walking past, but Martha ignored them until she heard a familiar voice call her name. “Martha.”

“You’re alive!” she whispered, then threw herself across the tunnel into Frank’s arms. “Oh! I thought we’d lost you.” A pig man slapped at Frank, and Martha glared at it over his shoulder. “All right, all right, we’re moving.” They all started walking, and Rose fell into step along with them, in line behind Frank.

Frank left his hand on her waist, and Martha hung onto it. “Where are they taking us?” he asked quietly.

“It’s not the where, but the who that concerns me,” Rose said darkly.
Martha looked back at her. “That’s the second time you’ve talked like you know what’s down here.”

“Because I do. And Martha… I’m sorry, but you are in so much more danger than you’ve ever been before.”

The serious, angry look on her friend’s face scared Martha. Frank put a comforting hand on her shoulder, and together they walked deeper into the sewers.

oOoOoOoOo

The Doctor could have followed the bond all the way to Rose, but he knew he couldn’t get her away from the pig men easily. He’d figured out where they were taking them, though—really, it hadn’t been hard to put together, given their location in Midtown and the conveniently still-under-construction Empire State Building. So instead of following Rose, the Doctor took a parallel path, striking out towards the Empire State Building through tunnels he hadn’t seen before.

“When you say they’ve taken her,” Tallulah said as they ducked under a portcullis, “who’s they exactly? And who are you anyway? I never asked.”

The Doctor picked up a high-pitched whine, out of range of human ears. He paused and held up a hand to Tallulah, hushing her.

“Oh, okay,” she said, her voice still dangerously loud.

The whine was joined by the lower-pitched noise of a Dalek moving, and the Doctor tried to quiet Tallulah again, but she ignored him.

She was still talking when the shadow of a Dalek was cast on the tunnel wall. “I mean you’re handsome and all—”

The Doctor spun around and put one hand over Tallulah’s mouth and the other on her arm, gagging her and dragging her into an alcove. As soon as she saw the Dalek, she ripped his hand off her mouth, and he assumed she understood the need for silence now. He held his breath as the Dalek rolled by them, only letting it out when it had passed completely.

The Doctor peered around the corner of the alcove, and once the Dalek turned the corner, he stepped out into the tunnel, muttering to himself. “No, no, no, no, no, no, no. They survived. They always survive.” Discovering that the war which had ended his race had not, as he’d expected, brought the Daleks to an equally final end had been a blow. And since then, they’d twice tried to separate him from Rose. Both times, he thought they’d gotten rid of all of them, and both times, a few remained.

“That metal thing?” Tallulah asked. “What was it?”

“It’s called a Dalek.” The Doctor spat the name out like a curse. “And it’s not just metal; it’s alive.”

She chuckled. “You’re kidding me.”

“Do I look like I’m kidding?” the Doctor said harshly. The smile disappeared from Tallulah’s face, and he continued. “Inside that shell is a creature born to hate, whose only thought is to destroy everything and everyone that isn’t a Dalek too. It won’t stop until it’s killed every human being alive.”

“But if it’s not a human being, that kind of implies it’s from outer space.” She looked at him, asking for a denial, and he just glared at her. “Yet again, that’s a no with the kidding.” She let out a shaky breath. “Boy. Well, what’s it doing here, in New York?”
For some reason, the Doctor suddenly remembered the first time Rose had met a Dalek. It had known then; it had known exactly what she meant to him. And now…

_Rose, you can’t let them see you._

He could almost see her roll her eyes. _How am I supposed to manage that?_

The Doctor paced the sewer. _I mean it. The Daleks share important information telepathically over the Pathweb. Even if we’ve never seen this group before, they will recognise you as my companion—possibly even my bond mate. I don’t want to find out what they’d do with that information._

Her comprehension was immediately followed by dread. _I told Dalek Sec that I killed the Emperor. They’ll all know that, won’t they?_

_Yes._ The Doctor beat his head lightly against the sewer wall. Yet again, she was in danger because of him. He caught and locked down the guilt before she could see exactly what he was thinking. _I’m hoping to get to you before you reach them._

_Hurry then._

The Doctor snarled a wordless epithet. The implication was clear; there wasn’t much time. He kicked at the wall, barely feeling the throbbing in his toes.

“Well that’s not gonna be very helpful,” Tallulah said.

The Doctor glared at her, then grabbed her by the arm and started walking back towards the theatre. “Every second you’re down here, you’re in danger. I’m taking you back right now.”

They turned a corner and the Doctor’s torch landed on a figure dressed in a jumpsuit with unmistakably porcine ears. Tallulah screamed, but the Doctor strode after the pig man with all the power of the Oncoming Storm.

“Where’s Rose?” The creature cowered against the wall, and the Doctor advanced on it relentlessly. “What have you done with her? And what have you done with Martha?”

“I didn’t take them.”

The Doctor raised his eyebrows; none of the other pig men had been able to speak. “Can you remember your name?” he asked, some of his anger evaporating.

“Don’t look at me,” he insisted, without looking the Doctor in the eye.

Tallulah started walking towards them slowly. “Do you know where they are?”

“Stay back!” the pig man ordered, holding a hand up. “Don’t look at me.”

“What happened to you?” the Doctor asked. The face half in shadows was mostly human still, but with the ears, snout, and teeth of a pig.

The self-loathing in his voice was familiar. “They made me a monster.”

“The Daleks?” the Doctor asked, not wanting to waste precious time in conversation. The pig man nodded. “Why?”

“They needed slaves.” Misery radiated out of the human eyes. “They needed slaves to steal more people so they created us. Part animal, part human. I escaped before they got my mind, but it was still
“They took them. It’s my fault. They were following me.”

“Were you in the theatre?” Tallulah asked.

“I never…” He stopped and looked at her over his shoulder. “Yes,” he whispered.

“Why?” she pressed, even though the Doctor thought she knew why. “Why were you there?”

“I never wanted you to see me like this.”

“Why me? Whadda I got to do with this?” She walked towards the Doctor and the pig man slowly. “Were you following me? Is that why you were there?”

He turned around, but carefully stayed in the shadows. “Yes.”

Tallulah took a half step back, horrified realisation on her face. “Who are you?” she asked as she started towards them again.

The Doctor ran out of patience with the reunion. Rose and Martha could run into the Daleks at any moment. “Tallulah, you know who he is,” he said, barely managing to curb the bite in his voice.

Her gaze flicked up to him, then back to the half-human form leaning against the wall. She took another two steps forward, then put a hand on his shoulder. At her behest, he moved into the light, and Tallulah put a hand over her mouth. “Laszlo? My Laszlo? Oh, what have they done to you?”

“I’m sorry. So sorry,” he whispered as she fidgeted with his collar and stroked the back of his neck.

“Laszlo, can you show me where they are?” the Doctor requested.

Laszlo turned to face him. “They’ll kill you.”

“If I don’t stop them, they’ll kill everyone… starting with my wife.”

“Then follow me.” Laszlo went around Tallulah and started down the tunnel in the opposite direction.

The pig men were still marching the captives through the tunnels when the Doctor contacted Rose. *Rose, you can’t let them see you,* the Doctor told her suddenly.

Rose snorted. *How am I supposed to manage that?*

*I mean it,* he insisted. *The Daleks share important information telepathically over the Pathweb. Even if we’ve never seen this group before, they will recognise you as my companion—possibly even my bond mate. I don’t want to find out what they’d do with that information.*

The first Dalek she’d met had called her the woman the Doctor loved. If it had passed that information along… A worse thought followed fast on the heels of that one.

*I told Dalek Sec that I killed the Emperor. They’ll all know that, won’t they?*
Yes. I’m hoping to get to you before you reach them.

A gust of damp air brushed over Rose’s neck, and she shivered. *Hurry then*, she told her Doctor, unsure of how much further they had to go.

Five minutes later, the muscles in Rose’s neck and shoulders tensed as the pig men corralled all the humans into a junction point of the sewer tunnels. None of this seemed right. Lurking in sewers? Kidnapping humans? That wasn’t exactly the way Daleks operated, was it?

*Except sometimes they do steal humans*, she reminded herself, thinking of the Game Station. *When they can’t generate pure Dalek DNA…*

The idea that they might be Dalek breeding stock sickened her, and the Doctor’s barely contained panic and rage didn’t help her nerves. It was hard not to wrap her own fear into it and send it back to him, escalating the emotions. Some of her anxiety dissipated when she could tell he was moving towards her, but only a little.

Trying to steady herself, Rose concentrated on the sting in her palms where she’d hit the wall earlier. It was fading, but if she ran her fingers over the sensitive skin, the uncomfortable sensation was enough to distract her.

“What are they keeping us here for?” Frank asked.

“I don’t know,” Martha said, and Rose noticed she was still massaging her wrist. “I’ve got a nasty feeling we’re being kept in the larder.”

Rose opened her mouth to correct her, but the pig men started grunting and fidgeting. When she caught a familiar noise, she ducked into the middle of the group.

*I can see you, Rose*, the Doctor said, and some of the tension left her body, just knowing he was close by.

“What’re they doing?” Frank asked. “What’s wrong? What’s wrong?”

“Silence. Silence,” a Dalek ordered as it rolled into sight.

Martha crouched down and looked around Frank at the Dalek. “What the hell is that?”

“You will form a line.” At their master’s orders, the pig men started pulling the humans into a neat line. “Move. Move.”

Rose sucked in a breath. In a straight line, there wouldn’t be any place to hide, but she couldn’t draw attention to herself by refusing.

Martha kept a level head and directed the others. “Just do what it says, everyone, okay? Just obey.”

“The female is wise. Obey.”

The Dalek rolled further into the tunnel, and a second appeared. “Report.”

“These are strong specimens. They will help the Dalek cause.”

“Dalek?” Martha repeated, and Rose realised she remembered the Doctor mentioning them the day before.

The Daleks continued to talk, and Rose was both amazed and frightened by how much of their plan
they were willing to talk freely about in front of their prisoners.

“What is the status of the final experiment?”

“The Dalekanium is in place. The energy conductor is now complete.”

“Then I will extract prisoners for selection.” A pig man dragged an older black man out of the line. “Intelligence scan, initiate.” The Dalek held its plunger arm up to its face. “Reading brain waves. Low intelligence.”

“You calling me stupid?” the man asked indignantly.

“Silence!” the Dalek ordered. “This one will become a pig slave. Next.”

The man struggled against the pig men as they dragged him away. “No, let go of me. I’m not becoming one of them. No! No.”

It continued that way down the line. The closer they got to Rose, the more nervous she became. But maybe the Daleks wouldn’t look at her timelines? They wouldn’t be thinking any time travellers would be close by…

Her attention snapped back to the Daleks when Martha was pulled forward. “Intelligence scan, initiate.” Martha held still while the plunger spun in front of her face. “Superior intelligence. This one will become part of the final experiment.”

“You can’t just experiment on people,” Martha protested. “It’s insane! It’s inhuman!”

“We are not human,” the Dalek said, in Dalek fashion.

Rose felt the harsh grip of the pig men on her arms and drew a deep breath. Hopefully… hopefully they wouldn’t notice…

But when the Dalek’s eyestalk looked at Rose, it rolled back half a step. “You are the Doctor’s mate,” it declared.

Rose smiled and tipped her head back. “Yeah. Yeah, I am.”

The other Dalek rolled over. “Where is the Doctor?”

“Not here,” she said breezily, smiling at them both. “We got a distress call from a planet in the Dagomar Cluster, and he said something about the air not being healthy for humans, so he brought me here for a little holiday while he went and took care of whatever they needed.” She looked at the Daleks and raised an eyebrow. “You can bet he didn’t know you were here,” she added disdainfully, “or he never woulda left.”

The Dalek eyestalks rotated to look at each other, and then they both looked back at Rose. She held her breath, hoping they would believe her story. Finally, the first one raised its plunger arm to her face and performed the same brain scan it had on the other prisoners. “Superior intelligence,” it declared, then turned to the pig men. “Prisoners of high intelligence will be taken to the transgenic laboratory.”

The Doctor’s hearts were still pounding in his chest when the Dalek scanned Rose. Her story had fooled them. After scanning her, the pig men started moving the line forward.
“Look out, they’re moving!” he said, ducking out of sight.

Laszlo started escorting Tallulah back down the tunnel, but stopped when he realised the Doctor wasn’t following. “Doctor. Doctor, quickly!”


“Laszlo, come on,” Tallulah said.

“Can you remember the way?” asked Laszlo.

The Doctor watched the Daleks’ approach while Laszlo talked Tallulah into leaving, and he shook his head. You’re a more persuasive man than I am, Laszlo. Laszlo joined him at the corner, and together they watched the Daleks pass by, followed by the line of humans waiting to be experimented on.

When Rose was in front of him, he darted out of cover to join the line behind her. Right here, love, he told her. Excellent bluff by the way.

She held a hand out behind her, and he grabbed it. I’m so glad to see you.

Rose tapped Martha on the shoulder, and a relieved smile spread across their friend’s face when she saw him. “I’m so glad to see you,” she breathed out.

“Yeah, that seems to be the general consensus,” the Doctor said. “What about you, Frank? Are you glad to see me, too?”

“If you can get us out of here, then yeah.”

They were led through a service door into a sub basement. Two more Daleks brought the count up to four, and when the Doctor noticed one was black, the pieces came together. The Cult of Skaro—the Daleks behind the Battle of Canary Wharf, where he’d almost lost Rose—had managed to escape. He gritted his teeth and glared at the end of the room, where Dalek Sec was shaking, with steam coming out of him, like a kettle about to boil.

One of the bronze Daleks in charge of the prisoners rolled forward. “Report.”

The bronze Dalek standing beside the black Dalek answered. “Dalek Sec is in the final stage of evolution.”

“Scan him. Prepare for birth.”

The Doctor stared at the Daleks in bafflement. “Evolution?”

“What’s wrong with old Charlie boy over there?” Martha wondered out loud.

“Ask them,” the Doctor and Rose told her in unison.

“What, me?” She looked back at them. “Don’t be daft.”

“We don’t exactly want to get noticed,” the Doctor hissed. “Ask them what’s going on.”

Martha’s back went ramrod straight and her hands clenched into fists, but she stepped out of the line and faced the Daleks. “Daleks, I demand to be told.”

The Daleks rolled towards Martha, and the Doctor and Rose skulked against the equipment on the
edge of the room, trying not to be noticed.

“What is this final experiment?” Martha stumbled over the words, then straightened up. “Report!”

“You will bear witness,” the Dalek told her.

Martha shook her head. “To what?”

“This is the dawn of a new age.”

“What does that mean?” Martha’s voice had lost the demanding edge and now sounded merely curious and confused.

“We are the only four Daleks in existence, so the species must evolve a life outside the shell. The Children of Skaro must walk again.”

The Doctor sucked in a breath. It had been thousands of years—hundreds of thousands even—since the Kaleds had walked the surface of Skaro. They didn’t have the physical form for it anymore; Davros had seen to that.

*And if they need humans of high intelligence to complete the final experiment*... He had a sickening feeling that he knew where they would get the bodies.

Dalek Sec’s shell stopped smoking, and the constant hum quieted to nothing as the light in the eyestalk went dead. The casing opened, but where the Dalek mutant would normally be, a new kind of creature was curled up inside.

It stumbled out of the shell on two legs, and the Doctor could see what it was now: a human/Dalek hybrid. The mollusk face of the Dalek was over the man’s head and his fingers looked more like fat tentacles, but the rest of his body was human.

The casing shut, and the new Dalek Sec stood up straight.

“What is it?” Rose gasped.

Dalek Sec answered before the Doctor could. It raised its head up so they could see the single eye staring at them from the tentacle head. “I am a human Dalek. I am your future.”
I Can't Say

Chapter Notes

This episode has a rather large continuity problem. Dalek Sec tells the Doctor they’re going to use a solar flare to power the genetic hybridisation, but by the time the Doctor reaches the top of the building, that’s changed to a lightning strike. The Daleks mention the solar flare once more, but otherwise, it’s a gamma strike/lightning strike. I researched the possibility of a solar flare causing a thunderstorm—no. So, given that it’s obviously lightning that strikes the Doctor, I’ve changed the earlier conversation with the Daleks to match the reality of what happens.

The Doctor stared at the being that had formerly been Mr. Diagoras and Dalek Sec. The blend of human and Dalek created a grotesque parody of both species.

Dalek Sec pointed at the humans who’d been selected for their superior intelligence. “These humans will become like me,” he said, and the pig men approached.

Sensing this was his best opportunity, the Doctor grabbed Rose’s hand and tugged her behind the scientific equipment with him. I’m going to create a little diversion, he told her, and it’d be best if you weren’t where they could see you. She nodded, and he pulled the radio out of his coat pocket.

“Prepare them for hybridisation,” Dalek Sec commanded.

“Leave me alone!” Martha ordered. “Don’t you dare!”

The Doctor tuned the radio in to the closest station, and “Happy Days Are Here Again” started playing.

“What is that sound?” Dalek Sec asked.

“Ah, well, now, that would be me.” The Doctor stepped out from behind the equipment and set the radio down next to a Bunsen burner. “Hello. Surprise. Boo. Et cetera,” he told Dalek Sec, putting his hands in his pocket.

“Doctor,” Dalek Sec spat out.

His minions were quick to spout out the typical Dalek rhetoric.

“The enemy of the Daleks.”

“Exterminate.”

They both rolled forward, but Dalek Sec threw his hands out. “Wait!”

The Doctor walked slowly towards the hybrid. He’d wondered how merging with a human would affect it, and already he was seeing differences. “Well, then. A new form of Dalek. Fascinating and very clever.”

“The Cult of Skaro escaped your slaughter,” Sec growled.
The Doctor pressed his lips together. Reminding him of Canary Wharf was not the wisest move. “How did you end up in 1930?”

Sec answered, putting a slight pause between each word in a way the Doctor was quickly realising was his new speech pattern. “Emergency temporal shift.”

“Oh,” The Doctor hummed smugly, looking around at the four Daleks. “That must have roasted up your power cells, huh?” He slowly walked away from the Daleks, tugging on his ear in a studied show of nonchalance. “Time was, four Daleks could have conquered the world, but instead you’re skulking away, hidden in the dark, experimenting.” He looked back at Dalek Sec. “All of which results in you.”

The hybrid clearly felt the implied insult in the words. “I am Dalek in human form.”

“What does it feel like?” the Doctor finally asked. He sauntered up to the hybrid and looked it straight in its cyclopean eye. “You can talk to me, Dalek Sec. It is Dalek Sec, isn’t it? That’s your name? You’ve got a name and a mind of your own. Tell me what you’re thinking right now.”

“I feel humanity,” Sec said, and turned away.

That was exactly the answer the Doctor had hoped for. “Good. That’s good.”

“I feel everything we wanted from mankind,” Sec continued, turning back to the Doctor and advancing slowly on him, “which is ambition, hatred, aggression and war. Such a genius for war.”

That was not the answer the Doctor had hoped for. He shook his head. “No, that’s not what humanity means.”

Sec cut him off before he finished the last word. “I think it does. At heart, this species is so very Dalek.”

The Doctor pivoted and started pacing in front of the Daleks. “All right, so what have you achieved then, with this final experiment, eh? Nothing! Because I can show you what you’re missing with this thing.” He pointed at all four Daleks, then at the radio. “A simple little radio.”

“What is the purpose of that device?” one of the Daleks asked.

“Well, exactly,” the Doctor said, nodding sagely. “It plays music. What’s the point of that? Oh, with music, you can dance to it, sing with it, fall in love to it.” He looked straight into the eyestalk of the Dalek standing on his right. “Unless you’re a Dalek of course. Then it’s all just noise.”

Before the Daleks realised what he was doing, the Doctor whipped his sonic out of his pocket and pointed it at the radio. Painful feedback came through the speakers, and the Daleks and pig men all cringed in pain.

The humans were barely keeping their feet, but they didn’t have the same kind of sonic hearing that the Daleks and pig men did. “Run!” the Doctor ordered them. Rose darted out from her hiding place, and the Doctor followed them out of the room.

They exited the basement through the same service door, escaping back into the tunnels. “Come on!” the Doctor shouted, moving up towards the front of the group. “Move, move, move, move, move!” They met Tallulah on the way, which somehow didn’t surprise him. “And you, Tallulah! Run!”

“What’s happened to Laszlo?” she asked.
The Doctor ignored her and kept running. When he reached the ladder leading to the theatre, he stood to the side, letting everyone else go up first. “Come on! Everyone up! Come on!” Rose had been at the back of the group, making sure they didn’t have any stragglers, and the Doctor followed her up the ladder.

oOoOoOoOo

Rose shivered in the cold November night, despite the campfire she, Martha, and Tallulah were all huddled around. The Doctor had taken them straight to Hooverville as soon as they’d left the sewer so they could warn the people.

Solomon paced on the other side of the fire, pausing occasionally to shoot disbelieving looks at the Doctor, who stood watching him with his arms crossed over his chest. “These Daleks,” he said finally, “they sound like the stuff of nightmares. And they want to breed?”

The Doctor nodded. “They’re splicing themselves onto human bodies, and if I’m right, they’ve got a farm of breeding stock right here in Hooverville.” He looked around at the tents and shook his head. “You’ve got to get everyone out.”

“Hooverville’s the lowest place a man can fall.” Solomon shook his head. “There’s nowhere else to go.”

Frank was crouched on the ground on Rose’s right, and she felt a pang in her heart when she saw the scared look on the young man’s face. Was there anyone else who would take care of him the way Solomon had?


“There’s got to be a way to reason with these things.”

Rose snorted. “Not bloody likely, mate.”

Frank stood and looked at Solomon. “You ain’t seen them, boss.”

“Daleks are bad enough at any time, but right now they’re vulnerable,” the Doctor explained in a low voice. “That makes them more dangerous than ever.”

A high-pitched whistle pierced the air, followed by a shout. “They’re coming! They’re coming!”

Rose’s stomach twisted into knots. They were too late.

“A sentry. He must have seen something,” Solomon said and adjusted his hold on his rifle.

“They’re here!” the sentry yelled. “I’ve seen them! Monsters! They’re monsters!”

The Doctor’s jaw twitched as the whole camp flew into a panic. “It’s started.”

Solomon took command of his city. “We’re under attack! Everyone to arms!”

Men reached into a shack and pulled out rifles, handing them out to each able-bodied person. Even Frank took a gun and pointed it into the night.

“I’m ready, boss,” he said, then looked at the unarmed men and women standing around. “But all of you, find a weapon! Use anything.”
The group scattered, people running off into the night as Hooverville descended into chaos. “Come back!” Solomon shouted after them. “We’ve got to stick together! It’s not safe out there! Come back!”

The pig men seemed to be everywhere, and none of the humans with guns were willing to leave the relative safety of the fire to track them down. Instead, they formed a tight circle, with the three women at the centre. All around them, the sound of pig men squealing echoed in the dark, mixed with the screams of the men they dragged off.

“We need to get out of the park,” Martha said.

The Doctor broke into the circle, brushing a hand over Rose’s shoulders. “We can’t. They’re on all sides. They’re driving everyone back towards us,” he said, indicating the people joining them in groups of two and three.

“We’re trapped,” cried Tallulah.

Solomon held steady. “Then we stand together. Gather round. Everybody come to me. You there, Jethro, Harry, Seamus, stay together. They can’t take all of us.”

Rose flinched when the first shot rang out, and then the air was filled with the sound of rifle fire. The Doctor slipped back through the crowd to stand behind her and Martha.

“If we can just hold them off till daylight,” Martha said hopefully.

“Oh, Martha, they’re just the foot soldiers.”

The Doctor’s voice sent a chill down Rose’s spine, and she followed his gaze upward. “Oh, my god.” A Dalek was flying towards them.

Whose idea was it to teach those things how to fly?

The Doctor looked over at her, the smallest hint of a smile teasing the corners of his mouth and she shrugged her shoulders. Well, wouldn’t it be easier if they couldn’t?

“What in this world is…?” Solomon mumbled.

“It’s the devil,” one of the men said. “A devil in the sky. God save us all. It’s damnation.”

“Oh, yeah?” Frank said. “We’ll see about that!” He fired at the Dalek. Its force field didn’t seem to be working, but even as weak as they were, the polycarbide shell still protected them from the bullets.

The Doctor darted forward and pushed the barrel of Frank’s gun down. “That’s not going to work.”

A second blip in the sky came closer and closer, and Martha crept up next to the Doctor and Rose. “There’s more than one of them.”

The two Daleks hovered in the air for a tense moment, and then they started flying around the camp, firing their death rays at the tents, blowing up munitions and driving out anyone who was still hiding.

“The humans will surrender,” one of the Daleks said.

“Leave them alone,” the Doctor shouted. “They’ve done nothing to you!”

Rose didn’t say anything when Solomon slowly walked out in front of the group. She recognised the
fierce determination on his face and knew he wouldn’t be persuaded to let this go without attempting to negotiate.

The Doctor wasn’t as willing to accept the other man’s decision. When he noticed Solomon, he rushed over and tried to push him back to relative safety. “No, Solomon. Stay back.”

Solomon straightened his back. “I’m told that I’m addressing the Daleks. Is that right? From what I hear, you’re outcasts too.”

“Solomon, don’t!” the Doctor pleaded, desperation making his voice harsh.

Solomon stared him down. “Doctor, this is my township. You will respect my authority.” He put a hand on the Doctor’s chest and pushed him firmly back into the crowd. “Just let me try.”

The Doctor backed away a few paces, knowing what was going to happen, feeling helpless to stop it. Solomon was so brave, and he was going to die.

Solomon stepped farther away from the group and held his gun out at his side. “Daleks, ain’t we all the same? Underneath, ain’t we all kin?” He slowly bent down and set the rifle on the ground.

“Right. See, I’ve just discovered this past day, God’s universe is a thousand times the size I thought it was. And that scares me. Oh yeah, terrifies me right down to the bone. But surely it’s got to give me hope—hope that maybe together we can make a better tomorrow. So, I beg you now, if you have any compassion in your hearts, then you’ll meet with us and stop this fight. Well? What do you say?”

The Doctor knew what the Dalek was going to say, but it was still painful when the word came.

“Exterminate.”

Solomon’s body glowed green for a moment when the death ray hit him, and the light illuminated his skeleton. The people in the camp screamed in fear as he slowly fell to the ground.

Frank darted forward. “No! Solomon!”

“They killed him,” Martha sobbed. “They just shot him on the spot.”

“Daleks,” the Doctor growled quietly, his chest heaving as he watched Frank grieve for Solomon. His anger pushed him forward—anger, and a sense of responsibility for the humans standing around him. He felt Rose’s protest when he looked up at the two Daleks, but her presence only solidified his decision. If he could save just one person… if he could save her…

“All right, so it’s my turn!” he shouted over the din. “What can I do to get you to stop attacking these people?”

The Dalek hovering over the group looked down on him, and the Doctor could almost feel its glee. “I will be the destroyer of our greatest enemy.”

“Well,” the Doctor drawled, shoving his hands into his pockets, “could we maybe discuss other options? Because frankly, I’d rather not die. Besides,” he added, “do you want to live in a world without me? I mean, what would the Daleks be without an arch enemy?”

“Ex—”

“No!” Rose shouted before it could complete the word.

The Doctor felt time slow around him, which seemed to surprise Rose as much as it did him. She
recovered quickly and moved to stand by his side.

“Rose…” The Doctor tried to push her back into the crowd, but she grabbed his arm and refused to leave him.

She lost her tenuous hold on time, and they both froze when it returned to normal, looking at the Dalek.

“—terminate.”

The Doctor flinched, waiting for the death ray, but it never came. Instead, the Dalek started talking to someone only he could hear, presumably Dalek Sec, who must have been watching the battle on CCTV.

“I do not understand. It is the Doctor… The urge to kill is too strong.”

This is weird, Rose said during the next pause. They don’t usually hesitate.

No, they don’t. I don’t know what’s going on.

Finally, the Dalek said, “I… obey.”

“What’s going on?” the Doctor asked.

“You will follow,” the Dalek said resentfully.

“No!” Martha cried out. “You can’t go.”

Rose answered their friend’s protest before the Doctor could. “He has to, Martha,” she said, glancing back over her shoulder at her. Then she looked at the Doctor and nodded, and he smiled, drawing strength from her resolve.

“The Daleks just changed their minds,” he explained to Martha. “Daleks never change their minds.”

“But what about us?” Martha whispered.

The Doctor looked at the crowd of frightened humans, then back at the Dalek. “One condition,” he said, looking steadily into the Dalek’s eyestalk. “If I come with you, you spare the lives of everyone here. Do you hear me?” he demanded harshly.

“Humans will be spared. Doctor, follow.”

Okay, this is getting really weird, Rose said. D’you think Dalek Sec came out a bit more human than they anticipated?

That’s my only guess. I need to find out though.

The Doctor nodded, then turned back to Rose and Martha.

“Martha, do what you do best,” he told the young medical student, who was still unhappy that he was leaving. “People are hurt. You can help them.” She nodded once and swallowed back tears before walking away.

Rose put a hand on his chest and tugged on his lapel. “You’d better bring this back to me in one piece,” she said severely. “I hear Janis Joplin gave you that coat—it would be a shame if it got ruined.”
The Doctor shook his head. “Oh, Rose Tyler, I do love you,” he said softly. He dipped his head down to give her a tender kiss, and at the same time, he managed to press the psychic paper into her hand.

“Social interaction will cease,” the Dalek ordered. “Step away from the female.”

It wasn’t easy to step back from her to go with the Daleks, but he had to find out what was going on, and if maybe there were finally Daleks in the world who weren’t completely evil.

The Doctor stalked through the tunnels, one Dalek in front of him and one behind. With each step he took, he remembered another person, another terrified face looking up at the sky as the Daleks fired down on them, and by the time he reached the laboratory, he was in a towering rage, all his curiosity over the Daleks’ strange behaviour temporarily forgotten.

“Those people were defenceless!” he yelled at Dalek Sec as he strode across the room towards him. “You only wanted me, but no, that wasn’t enough for you. You had to start killing, because that’s the only thing a Dalek’s good for.”

Dalek Sec bore his anger stoically, and then he said the one thing the Doctor had never expected a Dalek to say. “The deaths were wrong.”

“I’m sorry?” the Doctor asked, wondering if he’d heard correctly.

The single eye blinked repeatedly. “That man, their leader, Solomon. He showed courage.”

“And that’s good?” the Doctor clarified.

Sec nodded slightly. “That’s excellent.”

The Doctor looked at this new human/Dalek hybrid. “Is it me or are you just becoming a little bit more human?”

“You are the last of your kind, and now I am the first of mine.”

The Doctor had wished for an end to the Daleks for so long, it was hard to contemplate the start of a new kind of Dalek. But he bit back his retort, finally remembering why he was here.

“What do you want me for?”

Sec walked past the Doctor towards the other end of the room. “We tried everything to survive when we found ourselves stranded in this ignorant age.” He gestured to the lab equipment, a solution bubbling away. “First we tried growing new Dalek embryos, but their flesh was too weak.”

“Yeah, I found one of your experiments,” the Doctor bit out. “Just left to die out there in the dark.”

“It forced us to conclude what is the greatest resource of this planet. Its people.”

He flipped a breaker switch and all the lights came on. When the Doctor looked up, he realised hundreds of stretchers were suspended from the ceiling. Sec threw another breaker and one of the stretchers was lowered down.

The Doctor walked over to its side when it reached eye level. The body lying on the stretcher was wrapped in a shroud, but the outline was clearly human.
“We stole them,” Sec explained. “We stole human beings for our purpose.” He gestured to the covered body. “Look inside.”

The Doctor’s anger simmered again when he pulled back the cloth to reveal a man’s pasty white face.

“This is the true extent of the final experiment,” Sec told the Doctor.

“Is he dead?”

Sec looked down at the body. “Near death, with his mind wiped, ready to be filled with new ideas,” he said as he stroked the man’s face with his sausage fingers.

“Dalek ideas,” the Doctor snarled.

“The Human Dalek race.”

The Doctor looked up at the stretchers—hundreds of them. “All of these people. How many?”

“We have caverns beyond this storing more than a thousand.”

The number made the Doctor sick. “Is there any way to restore them?” he asked. “Make them human again?”

Sec looked down at the man, and there was something almost like regret on his face. “Everything they were has been lost.”

“So they’re like shells,” the Doctor said, finally grasping the scope and purpose of the so-called final experiment. “You’ve got empty human beings ready to be converted. That’s going to take a hell of a lot of power. This planet hasn’t even split the atom yet. How’re you going to do it?”

Rose watched the Doctor walk away, escorted by the two Daleks. Her throat ached with all the protests she was choking back. If she could choose one enemy to never see again, the Daleks would be at the top of the list, and she wished they could run straight back to the safety of the TARDIS. But he was right. The Daleks had changed their minds; they’d given up a chance to kill him. Something unprecedented was happening, and he had to figure out what it was.

And of course, his sacrifice allowed us all to live. The sounds of the camp seeped into her consciousness at that thought, and Rose turned and walked slowly towards Solomon’s tent.

The moonlight reflected off of Tallulah’s white costume and sparkly necklace as she pulled a pot of water off the fire. “Is Martha inside?” Rose asked, nodding to the tent.

Tallulah brushed a strand of hair out of her face and pushed the flap back. “Here you go,” she told Martha. “I got some more on the boil.”

Inside the tent, Martha was wrapping a bandage around a man’s wrist. “Thanks,” she told Tallulah, then looked at her patient. “You’ll be all right. It’s just a cut. Try and keep it clean.”

He stood up and nodded gratefully. “Thanks.”

Tallulah looked at Martha and Rose after he left. “So what about us? What do we do now?”

Rose started pacing the length of the tent. “I have half an idea, and I’m hoping the two of you can
help me figure out the rest of it.”

“What’s your idea?” Martha asked.

She held up the psychic paper. “The Doctor handed me this when we said goodbye.” She tapped the wallet against her hand and started pacing again. “I know he had a reason… I’m just not sure what it was.”

“What’s that for?” Tallulah asked, looking at the battered leather wallet.

“It’s called psychic paper,” Rose explained, opening it up and letting Tallulah see the blank sheet of paper inside. “It shows people what you want it to.”

“Get out of here!”

Rose closed the wallet and opened it back up. The showgirl gasped, and Rose grinned at her.

“What did you tell her?” Martha asked.

“Just because you’ve never seen it before doesn’t mean it isn’t true.” Rose closed the wallet and started pacing again, tapping the leather cover against her fingers. “Anyway, I know the Doctor had a reason for giving it to me, but I don’t know what it was.” She ran a hand through her hair. “And I’d ask him, but I don’t want to distract him while he’s negotiating with the Daleks.”

But no, the Doctor must have thought she already knew enough to figure out what he wanted her to do… because he knew she’d already heard the Daleks’ plan. “When we were in the sewers, the Daleks mentioned an energy conductor.”

Martha’s eyes lit up with recognition, but Tallulah was still lost. “What does that mean?” the showgirl asked.

Rose looked at Martha. “I was trying not to get noticed, so I didn’t pay very close attention. Martha?”

It was Martha’s turn to pace the tent. “Maybe like a lightning conductor,” she said, then her eyes widened. “Or… Dalekanium!”

“Oh,” Tallulah said quietly.

Rose remembered now. “They said the Dalekanium was in place.”

Tallulah looked at them hopelessly. “In place where?”

The two time travellers looked at each other, then Martha said, “Frank might know,” and darted out of the tent, leaving Rose and Tallulah to follow behind.

They found the young man sitting in front of a tent a few rows over, tears running down his face. “Frank?” Martha asked.

He wiped the tears away. “Hmmm?”

“That Mr. Diagoras, he was like some sort of fixer, yeah?” she said. “Get you jobs all over town?”

“Yeah. He could find a profit anywhere,” Frank said bitterly.

“But where, though? What sort of things?”
“You name it.” Grief had thickened Frank’s southern accent, adding a twang to the vowel sounds. “We’re all so desperate for work, you just hoped Diagoras would give you somethin’ good.” He drew in a long breath, then blew it out slowly and looked down at his knees, trying to maintain his composure. “Building work, that pays the best.”

Martha crouched down in front of him, meeting his eyes. “But what sort of building work?”

“Mainly building that.”

Rose followed the direction he was pointing and sucked in a breath when she saw the not-quite-finished Empire State Building.

_of course._

“Open the conductor plan,” Dalek Sec ordered.

A three dimensional representation of the Empire State Building rotated slowly on the screen. “Yeah, yeah, yeah,” the Doctor said. “The Empire State Building. We’re right underneath that. I worked that out already, thanks.” He suddenly realised he hadn’t actually told Rose that bit, but hopefully she could piece it together, too. “But what, you’ve hijacked the whole building?”

Dalek Sec gestured to the screen, and then vaguely at the lab. “We needed an energy conductor.”

The Doctor stared at him blankly. “What for?” So far, none of the parts of this story went together to make any sort of sense.

“I am the genetic template,” Sec explained. “My altered DNA was to be administered to each human body.” The image onscreen changed to a picture of two different strands of DNA, and as Sec talked, the pictures illustrated what he was saying. “A strong enough blast of gamma radiation can splice the Dalek and human genetic codes, and waken each body from its sleep.”

“Gamma radiation?” the Doctor asked, and a picture of a massive lightning strike flashed onscreen. “Oh, gamma rays. You’re going to use a lightning storm.”

“Tonight, one of the strongest thunderstorms in a century will hit New York City. Gamma radiation will be drawn to the energy conductor and when it strikes—”

“The army wakes,” the Doctor finished, finally understanding the plan. “I still don’t know what you need me for.”

“Your genius.” The Doctor looked at Sec expectantly, and he continued. “Consider a pure Dalek, intelligent but emotionless.”

“Removing the emotions makes you stronger,” the Doctor reminded him, thinking bitterly of Davros. “That’s what your creator thought, all those years ago.”

Sec looked the Doctor in the eyes. “He was wrong.”

The Doctor sucked in a breath; he’d been wrong before—that was the last thing he’d ever thought he’d hear a Dalek say. “He was what?”

“It makes us lesser than our enemies.” Sec put his clenched fist over his human heart. “We must return to the flesh, and also the heart.”
The Doctor looked at this Dalek who’d done nothing but surprise him. *Does he even realise what he’s suggesting?* “But you wouldn’t be the supreme beings anymore.” As repulsive as the results were, the Daleks and Cybermen were both right in thinking the lack of emotions made them stronger in some ways.

Dalek Sec nodded slightly. “And that is good.”

That bold statement drew immediate reactions from the three remaining Daleks, who the Doctor now realised had all been listening to the conversation closely.

“That is incorrect,” one of them said.

“Daleks are supreme,” another Dalek agreed.

Dalek Sec shook his head. “No, not anymore.”

“But that is our purpose.”

“That our purpose is wrong,” Sec declared. “Where has our quest for supremacy led us? To this.” He pointed at the laboratory equipment. “Hiding in the sewers on a primitive world, just four of us left. If we do not change now then we deserve extinction.”

“So you want to change everything that makes a Dalek a Dalek,” the Doctor said, still not sure he was hearing correctly.

Sec leaned towards him, almost like he was imploring him. “If you can help me.”

Static electricity crackled over Rose’s skin as she ran down 5th Avenue towards the Empire State Building, with the three humans following her. “What’re we doing?” Frank gasped as they ran.

“Well fine, but how’re we going to get past that guy?” Tallulah asked, pointing at the guard.

“I’ll take care of that,” Rose said, flashing her a quick smile and leading the way.

The guard held up a hand as they approached the door. “Sorry, folks, but the building isn’t open yet. Come back in three months,” he said.

Rose showed him the psychic paper. “We have urgent work we need to do on the top of the building,” she told him.

He glanced at the paper and nodded. “Oh right, I’m sorry. You should have said. Here, I’ll just open the door for you.”

They met another guard by the lift bays. The man raised an eyebrow, but when Rose showed him the psychic paper, he directed them into a hidden alcove. “The service elevator is your best bet,” he suggested. “It’ll take you straight to the work area.”

“Thanks,” Rose said.

No one said a thing until they were safely inside the lift, away from prying ears, then Martha said, “I
always wanted to go to the Empire State. Never imagined it quite like this, though.”

“Where are we headed anyway?” Frank asked nervously.

Rose nodded towards the ceiling. “The top, where they’re still building.”

Frank shook his head. “But how come those guys just let us through?” He looked down at the
psychic paper. “What is that?”

“Psychic paper,” Rose told him. “Shows them whatever I want them to think.” She flipped it open
and smiled. “According to this, we’re three engineers and an architect.”

Dalek Sec led the Doctor back over to the body he’d lowered from the ceiling. “Your knowledge of
genetic engineering is even greater than ours. The new race must be ready by the time the lightning
strikes.”

The Doctor looked down at the body, feeling a twinge of sympathy for the lost human. “But you’re
the template. I thought they were getting a dose of you.”

“I want to change the gene sequence,” Dalek Sec told him earnestly.

“To make them even more human?” the Doctor asked, unable to believe what he was hearing.

Sec looked down at the man and touched his face. “Humans are the great survivors. We need that
ability.”

The idea of a new Dalek race fascinated the Doctor, but he suddenly realised there was something
Dalek Sec hadn’t considered. “Hold on a minute. There’s no way this lot are going to let you do it,”
he said, jerking his thumb at the still-Dalek Daleks.

“I am their leader,” Sec declared, and the Doctor could almost taste the arrogance dripping from
those words.

He looked at the other three. “Oh, and that’s enough for you, is it?”

“Daleks must follow orders.”

“Dalek Sec commands, we obey.”

Dalek Sec turned towards him slowly. “If you don’t help me, nothing will change.”

The Doctor looked over at him. “There’s no room on Earth for another race of people.”

“You have your TARDIS.” Sec moved to stand with the other Daleks. “Take us across the stars.
Find us a new home and allow the new Daleks to start again.”

The Doctor stared at him for a long moment. When he’d been sent back to exterminate the Daleks
before they began, he hadn’t been able to do it. Looking back on it, he knew the first seeds of the
Time War had been sown in the Time Lords’ determination to interfere with another species. Maybe
by changing them from the killing machines they were into something more human, he could atone
for his part in it.

“When’s that lightning strike?”
“Eleven minutes.”

Eleven minutes to transform the Daleks into something else, something safer. “Right then. Better get to work.”

oOoOoOoOo

The top of Empire State Building was still open to the elements on one side. Tallulah spun around slowly, her eyes wide. “Look at this place. Top of the world.”

Rose and Martha both spotted the drawing board with the architect’s plans at the same time. “Okay, now this looks good,” Martha said.

“Hey, look at the date.” Frank pointed to the lower righthand corner. “These designs were issued today. They must’ve changed something last minute.”

“Something on the mast,” Rose added, reading the rest of the note. “See sheet number 49B for new mast cladding.”

Martha started rifling through the pages. “The ones underneath, they’re from before. So if I compare sheet 49B to an older sheet showing the mast…”

“The height of this place!” Tallulah exclaimed. “This is amazing.”

Rose looked up to see her walking towards the edge of the building. “Careful, we’re a hundred floors up. Don’t go wandering off,” she said, groaning silently as she echoed the Doctor’s frequent admonition.

“I just want to see.” She walked to the very edge and stared out at the city. “New York City. If aliens had to come to Earth, oh, no wonder they came here.”

“They seem to be awfully fond of London, too,” Rose muttered, drawing a snort of laughter from Martha.

“Here,” Frank said, “let’s put these blueprints down on the floor. We’ve gotta look at them side by side if we’re gonna find the changes.”

Rose and Martha sat on the floor with the sheets spread out around them. Outside, thunder rumbled as a storm rolled into New York City.

“I’ll go and keep an eye out,” Frank told them. “Make sure we’re safe up here. Don’t want nobody butting in.”

As he walked back towards the lift bay, Tallulah retreated from the edge of the building, her fur coat wrapped tight around her body. “There’s a hell of a storm moving in.”

“I wish the Doctor were here,” Martha muttered as they flipped through the pages, looking for an older one that detailed the mast. “He’d know what we’re looking for.”

Rose shook her head. “I wish he were here because then he wouldn’t be with the Daleks.” The only thing that had kept her calm was the fact that she’d felt the strangest emotion coming from him—hope. She sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Anyway, we’ll figure it out.”

“So tell me,” Tallulah asked, “where did you and him first hook up?”

The corner of Rose’s mouth turned up. “In the basement in the shop I worked at,” she said. “He
saved me from living shop window dummies, and then he blew up the building.”

“Wow!” Tallulah whistled. “I’ve heard of being swept off your feet, but that takes the cake.”

Rose laughed. “Yeah, it kinda does,” she agreed. “He definitely made an impression.”

“Well, a man who looks like that doesn’t need to work hard to catch a girl’s eye,” Tallulah pointed out. When Rose choked back a laugh, she mistook it for a sound of protest and said, “Oh, not that I’m interested, or even looking, but you’ve got to admit, he’s pretty good-looking.”

“He’s gorgeous,” Martha agreed. “If he hadn’t been married when I met him…” Rose looked over at her, and she shook her head quickly. “You’ve got nothing to worry about,” she promised. “I’d never go after a married man.”

Rose remembered the argument she and the Doctor had witnessed outside the restaurant the night they’d picked Martha up, and thought she understood.

“Still,” Martha said, mischief in her eyes, “I have to say your husband is one of the fittest blokes I’ve ever laid eyes on.”

“Just don’t let him hear you say that,” Rose groaned. “His ego is bad enough as it is.”

She paused on the next sheet of building plans. “I think this might be it,” she said, looking at the mast. “Come on, let’s put the two side by side and see if we can figure out what mast cladding means.”

They were silent for a moment, then Martha jabbed triumphantly at the page. “Gotcha. Look. There, on the mast.” Rose saw it right away. “Those little lines? They’re new. They’ve added something, see?”

“Added what?” Tallulah asked.

All three women realised it at the same time. “Dalekanium!”

The wind picked up and the plastic that provided some shielding from the elements fluttered loose of the ties. Rose looked out at the storm and considered the building static charge she could feel in the air.

“They’re going to use a lightning strike,” she said, speaking slowly as the pieces fell together. “They’ve got Dalekanium on the mast, and lightning will strike, and then…” She stopped and shrugged; that was all she’d figured out.

She jumped to her feet and jogged over to the ladder that led to a trap door, hearing Martha behind her. “I’ve got to get up there and take the Dalekanium off,” she said.

“Let me help,” Martha said. “Even just as a spotter to make sure you don’t fall—it isn’t safe to be that high up by yourself.”

“Yeah, sure,” Rose said. She had one foot on the ladder when a sudden surge of anger caught her off guard. Something was going wrong, something that had been going right was now going very wrong. The tenuous calm she’d had regarding her Doctor being alone with four Daleks disappeared.

“Rose? What is it?”

“I think we’re about to run out of time,” she answered, and started climbing.
The Doctor bent down to look at the Dalek gene solution, bubbling away. The Daleks had top notch equipment; he had to give them that. “There’s no point in chromosomal grafting, it’s too erratic,” he said. “You need to split the genome and force the Dalek human sequence right into the cortex.”

“We need more chromatin solution,” said Dalek Sec.

“The pig slaves have it,” one of the Daleks said as a group of pig men entered the room, carrying large crates.

Laszlo was among the pig men, and the Doctor met his eyes, then looked over at Dalek Sec. “These pig slaves, what happens to them in the grand plan?”

“Nothing. They’re just simple beasts. Their lifespan is limited. None survive beyond a few weeks.”

Laszlo glanced back over his shoulder, and the Doctor knew he’d heard that pronouncement. He grimaced; it wouldn’t be easy, but somehow, he had to at least try to save the man’s life.

“Power up the line feeds,” Dalek Sec ordered.

A Dalek placed his plunger arm over the computer terminal, and the Doctor sidled over to Laszlo. “Laszlo, I can’t undo what they’ve done to you, but they won’t do it to anyone else.”

Laszlo’s gaze darted over the Doctor’s shoulder at Dalek Sec. “Do you trust him?”

The Doctor drew in a breath; that was the question of the hour. “I know that one man can change the course of history,” he said slowly. “Right idea in the right place at the right time, it’s all it takes. I’ve got to believe it’s possible.”

As surreal as it was, changing the Daleks into something other than the hate-filled creatures they were, the ones the Time Lords had originally gone to war against, would somehow redeem his actions in ending the War. It would mean that at least one good thing had come out of it, and he couldn’t let go of the hope that it could happen.

He raced around the laboratory for the next two minutes, adjusting the various solutions that would be blended together to create the new DNA sequence that would be spliced into the human bodies when the lightning struck. This was the only chance he would get to make up for what he’d done when he’d pushed that red button.

“The line feeds are ready,” one of the Daleks announced.

“Then it’s all systems go,” the Doctor said, injecting more chromatin solution into the line.

“The lightning strike is imminent,” Dalek Sec said, looking at the monitor.

“We’ll be ready for it.” He injected a final solution into the centrifuge. “That compound will allow the gene bonds to reconfigure in a brand new pattern. Power up!”

The Doctor pushed back from the laboratory equipment and whipped his glasses off, watching as Laszlo and another pig man threw the breaker switches.

“Start the line feeds,” Dalek Sec ordered.

The solution started pumping through the system towards the human bodies. “There goes the gene solution.”
“The life blood,” Dalek Sec said.

Everything was going perfectly, but then a klaxon sounded in the laboratory. “What’s that?” the Doctor asked.

“What’s happening?” asked Dalek Sec. “Is there a malfunction? Answer me!”

But the Doctor could see exactly what they were doing. The solution that had been pumping towards the humans was now going in reverse. “No, no, no. The gene feed! They’re overriding the gene feed!” He looked at the controls, and they confirmed exactly what he already knew.

“Impossible,” Sec denied. “They cannot disobey orders.”

The Doctor glanced to his right to see the all-too-familiar sight of a Dalek death ray pointing directly at him. “The Doctor will step away from the controls.”

The Doctor backed up slowly, helpless anger boiling up. This was exactly what he’d feared as soon as Dalek Sec had told him the plan, but he’d allowed himself to believe it could work. He should have known; Dalek Sec had sealed his fate and the Doctor’s the moment he’d denied the supremacy of the Dalek race.

“Stop!” Sec ordered. “You will not fire.”

Another Dalek rolled towards them. “He is an enemy of the Daleks.”

“And so are you.” One of the death rays pointed away from the Doctor to Dalek Sec.

The Doctor put a hand on Dalek Sec’s shoulder, but he wouldn’t be silenced. “I am your commander. I am Dalek Sec.”

But the Daleks seemed to have a different view on things.

“You have lost your authority.”

“You are no longer a Dalek.”

“What have you done?” the Doctor asked. “What’s going into the gene feed?”

“The new bodies will be one hundred percent Dalek.”

“No!” Sec protested. “You can’t do this!”

“Pig slaves, restrain Dalek Sec and the Doctor,” one of the Daleks ordered, and several pig slaves came forward.

“Release me,” Sec ordered the pig men. “I created you. I am your master.”

The Doctor glanced over his shoulder and realised Laszlo was the only one holding onto him.

Alarms sounded throughout the lab, and two of the Daleks looked at the monitors. “Static charge building in the atmosphere.”

“Prepare for the lightning strike.”

Almost imperceptible over the loud buzzing, the Doctor heard a quiet ding. “There’s the lift,” Laszlo said.
The Doctor looked at the Daleks, all absorbed in their science project. “After you.” Together, they turned and ran towards the doors, the Doctor using the sonic to get them open.

Their exit didn’t go unnoticed. “The Doctor is escaping,” a Dalek shrieked. “Stop him! Stop him!”

Pig men rushed at the elevator, and the Doctor pointed the sonic towards the controls, closing the door right in their faces.
The wind cut through Rose’s jeans, turning her legs numb before they even reached the mast. She rubbed her hands together and kept climbing, a vague sense of time running out tickling the back of her mind.

Once she reached the platform, she crept over to the mast, keeping a low profile so the wind couldn’t catch her and send her flying over the edge of the building. Martha copied her, and a moment later they were crouched side by side in front of the first of three panels of Dalekanium.

“All right, let’s do this,” Rose said, pulling her sonic screwdriver out of her pocket. Despite the circumstances, she felt a tiny thrill go through her—this was her first time using her own tool in a “save the universe” situation.

“Can I ask,” Martha said as she went to work on the first bolt holding the closest panel to the mast, “earlier you said you didn’t want to ask the Doctor what he wanted you to do.”

Rose looked sideways at her. She hadn’t been thinking when she’d said that out loud, and she was glad Tallulah hadn’t caught it. She knew Martha, and she still wasn’t sure if she wanted to tell her.

The bolt snapped and Martha pulled it loose while Rose went on to the next one. “Let’s finish this first,” Rose suggested. “When we get home, I’ll talk to the Doctor and—”


Faced with a direct question, Rose nodded. Martha shook her head. “You two really are alien,” she muttered.

Rose glanced at her, trying to feel out how bothered she was by the revelation. “We don’t like… read your mind though,” she said awkwardly. “That’s not how it works.”

“But you can read his mind.”

“Well, we’re married,” Rose said, and thankfully Martha accepted that answer. She’d already had to share more than she felt completely comfortable with. *Time to move on from personal topics!* “Now, let’s see about getting this stuff off the mast before the lightning hits, yeah?”

The Doctor tucked the sonic back into his jacket pocket. “We’ve only got minutes before the lightning strike. We need to get to the top of the building.”

He glanced to his right and saw Laszlo leaning against the wall, breathing heavily. “Laszlo, what’s wrong?”
“Out of breath,” Laszlo reassured him. “It’s nothing. We’ve escaped them, Doctor. That’s all that matters.”

The Doctor put a hand on his friend’s shoulder. He was playing this casually, but they both knew what was really happening. Dalek Sec had told them that none of the pig men lasted more than a few weeks—which, coincidentally, was how long Tallulah had said he’d been missing.

They reached the top floor, and he forced those thoughts to the back of his mind. If he could, he would help Laszlo later. Right now, they had to stop the Daleks.

He expected to see Rose when the lift doors opened, but Frank and Tallulah were alone, pacing the floor nervously. “Where’s Rose?” His eyes scanned the room and lit on a ladder. “Did she go up there?”

He was already to the ladder when Frank confirmed his hypothesis. “They said something about Dalekanium on the mast and climbed up there about… oh, almost two minutes ago.”

The Doctor leaned over to the open side of the building and looked out. New York City spread out below them—far, far below them. “Oh, that’s high. That’s very…” He blinked against the sudden vertigo. “Blimey, that’s high.”

On the other side of the room, the lift dinged. The Doctor whirled away from the ladder and whipped the sonic out, but the doors were already closed by the time he reached them. “No, no, no.” He tried to sonic the controls, but as he’d expected, they’d made that impossible. “Deadlock seal.” He smacked the lift door in frustration. “I can’t stop it.”

“Where’s it going?” Tallulah asked.

“Right down to the Daleks. And they’re not going to leave us alone up here.” He raked a hand through his hair. “All right, I’m going up. I’ll send Rose and Martha down to help you deal with whatever the Daleks send up.”

“Be careful, Doctor,” Laszlo said.

“Oh, me? I’m always careful.”

His flippant words taunted him when he stood at the base of the mast for a moment, looking up at it, then down at the street. Right. No more looking down. Resolutely, he grabbed the scaffolding surrounding the mast and hoisted himself up.

Strong winds caught his coat and made it difficult to maintain his hold on the scaffolding. Thunder rumbled in the night sky as he pulled himself up onto the platform supporting the mast.

“Fancy meeting the two of you here,” he quipped.

“Doctor!” Rose smiled at him. “We’ve managed to get one piece of the Dalekanium off, or almost—just one bolt left to go.”

The Doctor pulled his sonic screwdriver out of his pocket and insinuated himself between Rose and the mast. “I need you both to go back down. I’ll finish removing the Dalekanium.” Rose’s displeasure was obvious, and he held up a hand to forestall her argument. “My body can handle this weather better than yours can, Rose. I can even withstand a lightning strike if it comes to that.”

Martha nodded and started back down, but Rose scowled at him. “I won’t just hide down there and wait for you to come back.”
He smiled grimly. “No, you won’t just be waiting for me,” he told her. “Because while I’m up here, you’re going to have to fight. The Daleks are sending the pig men up, and I need you to stop them, Rose.”

She pressed her lips together and nodded once before hugging him desperately. “Be careful,” she whispered into his coat, then let him go.

“You too,” he told her, then watched as she lowered herself over the edge of the platform.

The countdown to the lightning strike ticked down in his head. He had less than four minutes to remove the remaining panels of Dalekanium from the mast.

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When Martha returned to the work area, Frank and Laszlo were talking quietly by the lift. They both looked up when they heard her, hopeful expressions on their faces. “The Doctor’s going to get the Dalekanium off the mast.”

Frank shook his head. “We’ve got bigger problems than that.” He jerked his thumb at the lift. “Them Daleks called the elevator back, and it’s dollars to doughnuts they’ll be sending someone up.”

The American idiom was unfamiliar to Martha, but she guessed it meant a sure thing. Thunder rolled before she could answer, and the storm gave her an idea.

Rose lowered herself down the ladder, and the militant set to her jaw pulled Martha’s attention away from the immediate problem of the lift. “Everything all right?” she asked.

“Fine, yeah,” Rose said blithely. “My husband is at the top of the tallest building in the world in the middle of a thunderstorm, but I’m fine. Really.”

Martha looked at her warily. The Doctor’s reaction to Rose’s kidnapping on New Earth loomed so large in her mind that she’d forgotten Rose’s own anxious determination when he’d been attacked by the plasmavore.

“Anyway,” Rose said brightly, “the Doctor says it’s our job to keep the pig men back, and if we’re going to fight, we need weapons. Grab what you can to defend yourself.”

Everyone reached for metal pipes and the heavy work tools, but Martha shook her head. “I had an idea, actually.” She swallowed hard when they looked at her expectantly. “First, I don’t think we can fight them head-on. Laszlo?”

He shook his head. “Not with pipes and building tools. They’re savages. I should know.” He rocked unsteadily on his feet before continuing. “They’re trained to slit your throat with their bare teeth.”

She nodded. “So we need a different idea. And I thought… They’re coming up in a lift. A metal box. And lightning is going to strike in…” She looked at Rose.

“Just over two minutes.”

“Right. So if we put some kind of conductor together and connected it to the lift, then it would fry them as soon as the lightning hit.”

Laszlo moaned and collapsed onto the floor, distracting the group for a moment. “Laszlo?” Tallulah said. She dropped her wrench and went to his side. “What is it?”
“No, it’s nothing,” he insisted. “I’m fine. Just leave me.” He tried to get to his feet, but he fell back against the wall.

“Oh, honey, you’re burning up,” Tallulah cooed. “What’s wrong with you? Tell me.”

“Great,” Frank muttered. “One man down, we ain’t even started yet.”

“Well, the rest of us need to get started,” Rose said briskly. “Martha’s plan is excellent.”

Once Rose had gone, the Doctor examined the panels of Dalekanium. Each one was secured to the mast with two metal bands, each held in place with two bolts. Rose and Martha had gotten three of the bolts undone on the first panel, and the Doctor made quick work of the fourth. Then he pulled it loose and tossed it aside before moving on to the second one, working as quickly as he could to remove it as well.

The storm was getting worse when he yanked it off the mast, and his fingers were stiff from the cold. He stuck the sonic in his mouth as he shifted around the mast to the third panel and rubbed his hands together, trying to get feeling back into the uncooperative digits, but he had a feeling it hadn’t done much good.

In the middle of removing the first bolt holding the third piece of Dalekanium to the mast, the Doctor’s hand slipped and his fingers lost their grip on the sonic screwdriver. He yelled and lunged for it, but he wasn’t fast enough and it tumbled down to the base of the mast.

The Doctor hung over the side, looking down at the tool. He’d never be able to get down there and back up in time, much less have time to take off the last panel. After a second, he pushed himself back up to the panel and tugged at the Dalekanium with his bare hands. He couldn’t let the Daleks win, not again, not like this.

Rose ran with Martha to the edge of the building and picked up a long pipe. “We’ve got a minute left before the strike, according to the Doctor’s countdown.”

“Then let’s get to work!” Martha cried. They carried the pipe over to the lift and used chairs to hold it off the floor.

“Can I help?” Frank asked.

“Grab chairs, saw horses, anything you can find that we can lay the pipes over,” Rose told him. “They can’t be on the floor, because the lightning would just go into the concrete and be grounded.”

“What the hell are you three clowns doing?” Tallulah yelled at them from where she sat caring for Laszlo.

“Even if the Doctor gets all the Dalekanium off, this place is still going to get hit,” Rose said as she and Martha set their pipe down over the first two chairs Frank had found.

Martha picked up the explanation where she left off. “Great big bolt of lightning, electricity all down this building. Connect this to the lift and they get zapped.”

“Oh my God, that could work,” the showgirl said admiringly.
“Then give us a hand,” Frank barked at her, and she finally got up off the floor and helped him arrange the chairs.

Rose looked at Frank. “We need to connect this to the scaffolding,” she told him. “The mast, that’s what’s going attract the lightning.” She twitched at the thought, but forced herself to focus on stopping the pig men.

“Leave it to me,” Frank said and went to the edge of the building, carefully climbing onto the scaffolding.

Inside, they managed to get a connected line of metal poles leading from the edge of the building to the lift doors. “Is that going to work?” Tallulah asked sceptically.

Martha put the last pipe in position and backed away from the doors. “It’s got to.”

Frank came back inside. “I’ve got it all piped up to the scaffolding outside.”

Rose sat down on the concrete floor. “Come here, Frank,”

“Just sit in the middle and don’t touch anything metal,” Martha added.

“Yes,” Frank agreed, sitting down with them with his back to the wall.

They all watched the lift as it got closer and closer to the top floor.

The last panel wouldn’t budge, no matter how hard the Doctor pulled on it. Between the static charge in the air and the countdown ticking down in his head, he knew he had very little time remaining. If he wanted to stop this Frankendalek experiment, he had to do something—now.

He stared up at the mast. There was only one option left. *I’m sorry, Rose,* he told her as he got to his feet and wrapped his body around the mast. She immediately pelted him with questions, asking what he was about to do, but he ignored them—he couldn’t bring himself to tell her.

Even if this didn’t kill him, the pain would be almost unbearable. It would be strong enough to echo across their bond, and he gritted his teeth against the knowledge that he was about to cause her pain.

The Doctor reached out to Rose only seconds before the lightning strike was scheduled. *I’m sorry, Rose.*

She jerked to her feet. *What do you mean you’re sorry? Doctor? What are you doing?*

He didn’t answer, and she started for the edge of the building. She only made it one step before Martha grabbed her hand and yanked her back down to the floor.

“What are you doing?”

Rose opened her mouth to explain, but the lightning struck and searing pain went through her body. She screamed and arched her back against the sensation, then curled up in a ball on the floor, panting for breath.

“Rose? Rose, what’s wrong?”
The pain slowly dwindled, and Rose was aware of Martha calling for her frantically. She opened her eyes and looked up at her. “It’s the Doctor,” she said, her voice hoarse from screaming.

The air was filled with the smell of ozone and roasted flesh, and she looked over at the lift. “It worked, Martha.”

Martha looked over her shoulder and slumped when she saw the dead pig men. “They used to be like Laszlo,” she said quietly. “They were people, and I killed them.”

“No,” Laszlo countered. “The Daleks killed them, long ago.”

Rose pushed herself to her feet. “I’m going to get the Doctor,” she said and went over to the ladder. She had one foot on the first rung when Martha put a hand on her shoulder. “Are you sure you’re okay to be going up there?” she asked. “Maybe I should check you out first.”

Rose shook her head. “All I got was the initial sensation. Once the lightning went through the Doctor, I was fine.” Martha didn’t let go of her, and Rose narrowed her eyes at her. “And honestly, Martha, you’d have to knock me out to keep me from going up there.”

Martha nodded. “Then I’m going with you,” she said. Rose opened her mouth to argue, and Martha shook her head. “If he’s… you might need help getting him down.”

A chill ran down Rose’s spine at the thought, but she couldn’t pretend that wasn’t a possibility.

The winds buffeting the top of the building were stronger than they had been before, and Rose swayed a little in the breeze. She grabbed onto the scaffolding, and then she saw something that made her heart clench—a familiar sonic screwdriver.

She stuck it in her coat pocket, then used the scaffolding to swing herself up to the mast. Martha grumbled behind her, but a moment later, Rose could tell she was climbing too.

When she reached the pedestal supporting the mast, Rose froze. The Doctor was lying there, obviously unconscious. He’s just unconscious. For the second time in under a week, she reminded herself that she would know if he were dead, and he would regenerate.

Logic couldn’t convince her though. She crawled over to him and reached for his wrist, breathing a sigh of relief when she felt the familiar double pulse. “It’s time to wake up, my Doctor,” she whispered in his ear.

He turned his head a little, and tension lines appeared around his eyes. “Oh, my head,” he moaned. Rose clutched his hand to her heart. “Hello,” she said, smiling through tears.

His eyes fluttered open. “Hello,” he returned. “So it worked?”

“The pig slaves are dead,” Rose confirmed. “We used the lightning strike to electrocute them in the lift—Martha’s idea,” she added, pointing at their friend. Then she looked back at him. “Speaking of the lightning strike…”

He pushed himself up. “I’m sorry, Rose,” he said, his voice hoarse. “If there’d been any other way…”

Rose pressed her lips into a thin line and shook her head. “There’s Dalekanium still attached,” she said, glancing at the mast.
“Which was why I had to… get in the way of the lightning strike.”

Rose narrowed her eyes. “You let the lightning pass through you first, so it carried Time Lord DNA along with it.”

“Something like that,” he agreed. A groan escaped his lips when he stood up and shuffled to the edge of the platform.

Martha put a hand on his arm, steadying him as he lowered himself over the side. “But if there was still Dalekanium attached, then there are still human Daleks out there,” she pointed out.

“Let’s get out of this wind, and I can tell you all about it,” the Doctor suggested.

Back down in the work area, the Doctor stood in the open end of the building and looked out at the city below. “The Daleks will have gone straight to a war footing. They’ll be using the sewers, spreading the soldiers out underneath Manhattan.”

“How do we stop them?” asked Laszlo.

The Doctor drew a breath. “There’s only one chance. I got in the way.” He looked at Rose, but she refused to meet his gaze. “That lightning strike went zapping through me first.”

“Yeah, but what does that mean?” Martha asked.

The Doctor ignored Martha’s question and blocked out Rose’s anger as best he could. “We need to draw fire,” he said as he walked back into the room. “Before they can attack New York, I need to face them. Where can I draw them out? Think, think, think, think, think. We need some sort of space.” He grabbed his hair and tugged at it, trying to focus. “Somewhere safe. Somewhere out of the way. Tallulah!” He spun around and pointed at her.

“That’s me. Three Ls and an H.”

“The theatre!” he exclaimed. “It’s right above them, and, what, it’s gone midnight? Can you get us inside?”

She grinned. “Don’t see why not.”

The Doctor turned back around and remembered the lift had been zapped. “Is there another lift?”

“We came up in the service elevator,” Martha told him and ran off.

“That’ll do. Allons-y!”

As they ran towards the theatre, the Doctor tentatively tried to reach out for Rose through the bond. He’d known she wouldn’t be pleased with him, but he hadn’t anticipated this much anger.

What’s wrong, Rose?

I’m all right.

The use of their private code to say, “I’m not ready to talk about it,” nearly had the Doctor stopping and insisting that they… talk about it. He shook his head; they didn’t have time to talk right now, and even if they did, forcing the conversation before she was ready wouldn’t be a good idea.

When they reached the theatre, the Doctor whipped his coat off and jumped up on one of the seats. “This should do it. Here we go.” He pulled the sonic out and pushed the button.
“There ain’t nothing more creepy than a theatre in the dark,” Tallulah muttered. Laszlo collapsed into a seat behind her, and she turned to look at him. “Laszlo, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he panted. “It’s just so hot.”

“But it’s freezing in here. Doctor, what’s happening to him?”

“Not now, Tallulah. Sorry.” The Doctor held his sonic to his ear, trying to pick up the frequency the Daleks were broadcasting orders over.

“What are you doing?” Rose asked.

He glanced down at her, wincing at the stony expression on her face. “If the Daleks are going to war, they’ll want to find their number one enemy.” He looked down at her apologetically as he held the sonic overhead. “I’m just telling them where I am.”

“Right,” she said. “Of course the plan is to lead them straight to us.”

The Doctor hopped off the seat, the sonic still held aloft. “I’d be happier if the rest of you would go. Frank can take you back to Hooverville.”

Rose snorted. “Not happening. You stayed up on the mast alone, and—” She cut herself off and took a breath. “I’m not leaving this time, Doctor.”

He sighed and looked at Martha, but their friend crossed her arms and shook her head. “If Rose is staying, then so am I.”

Rose could feel the Doctor’s very real fear that something might happen to her if she stayed, but she wouldn’t let him send her away this time. Feeling his pain and then finding his still body lying on the base of the mast… She clenched her jaw and reached for the anger, shoving everything else aside. If he hadn’t sent me away, we could have worked together and finished the job.

The door burst open, making the conversation a moot point anyway. Two lines of humans marched into the theatre, carrying weapons modelled after the Dalek death ray. Their eyes were glazed over, and Rose realised that no matter what they were—human, Dalek, Time Lord, or some mixture of the three—right now, they were not in control of their own actions.

“Doctor!” Tallulah cried out. “Oh, my God! Well, I guess that’s them then, huh?”

“Humans, with Dalek DNA?” Martha asked.

Frank started towards one of them, and the Doctor grabbed his arm. “It’s all right, it’s all right. Just stay calm. Don’t antagonise them.”

“But what of the Dalek masters? Where are they?” asked Laszlo.

Rose couldn’t stand it any longer. Do you have a plan? she asked the Doctor.

He looked at her, obviously surprised she was reaching out for him. I do, he promised. It’s slightly mental, but I promise it’s the only thing I can think of that will stop the Daleks from conquering the Earth.

Rose drew in a breath and let it out slowly. She’d once told him to put the safety of the planet over her well-being; how could she be upset when he put it above his own? But now she understood better than she ever had before why that had been such a hard choice for him to make.
Explosions backstage brought the conversation to a close. When the smoke cleared, Rose saw two regular Daleks, with Dalek Sec in chains between them, on his hands and knees like a pet.

“The Doctor will stand before the Daleks.”

Rose watched the Doctor climb over the seat in front of him and walk along the backs of the seats until he was standing on the front row, facing the Daleks. *That would be dead sexy,* she admitted to herself, *if he weren’t offering himself up to the Daleks.*

“You will die, Doctor. It is the beginning of a new age.”

“Planet Earth will become New Skaro.”

“Oh, and what a world,” the Doctor said sarcastically. “With anything just the slightest bit different ground into the dirt.” He pointed at Dalek Sec. “That’s Dalek Sec. Don’t you remember? The cleverest Dalek ever and look what you’ve done to him. Is that your new empire, hmm? Is that the foundation for a whole new civilisation?”

Dalek Sec lifted his head up and looked at the human-Dalek hybrids. “My Daleks, just understand this. If you choose death and destruction, then death and destruction will choose you.”

Rose had to bite back a giggle—since when did Daleks sound like fortune cookies?

“Incorrect,” one of the Daleks said. “We will always survive.”

“Now we will destroy our greatest enemy, the Doctor.”

“But he can help you,” protested Sec.

“The Doctor must die.”

The Doctor was trying to suppress his emotions, but Rose felt the spike of fear. This was his plan, but he didn’t know if it would work. She started to climb over the seat, but Martha yanked her back.

“Oh no, you don’t,” she said through gritted teeth. “I’m gonna make sure at least one of you makes it through this alive.”

Sec crawled to the front of the stage. “No, I beg you, don’t.”

“Exterminate!”

“No!” Rose screamed, preparing herself for the searing pain of the death ray.

It never came. Instead, Dalek Sec stood up and blocked the Dalek’s shot.

“Your own leader,” the Doctor said angrily, looking at the body on the stage. “The only creature who might have led you out of the darkness and you destroyed him.” He turned around and addressed the human Daleks lining the theatre aisles. “Do you see what they did? Huh? You see what a Dalek really is?”

Rose chewed on her thumbnail. Now they would find out if his plan had worked.

“If I’m going to die, let’s give the new boys a shot. What do you think, eh? The Dalek humans.” The Daleks looked at each other, then back at the Doctor. “Their first blood. Go on, baptise them.”

He held his arms out like an open target, and Rose groaned. There was such a thing as pushing it too far.
But it worked. “Dalek humans, take aim.”

The Dalek humans primed their weapons as one.

The Doctor stared down the Daleks on stage. “What are you waiting for? Give the command!”

“Exterminate!”

Rose froze. She was peripherally aware of Martha and Tallulah whimpering slightly, but her time senses tingled, distracting her. Two paths diverged here… hopefully the one that happened would let the Doctor live.

Rose looked at the faces of all the Dalek hybrids around her and felt a glimmer of hope that the Doctor’s crazy plan might work. Somehow, they didn’t seem quite as blank as they had before. Their individual wills were coming out.

“Exterminate!” the Dalek repeated.

And yet, the army surrounding them remained still.

“Obey. Dalek humans will obey.”

“They’re not firing,” Martha muttered. “What did he do?”

“Shhh, don’t complain,” Rose hissed.

“You will obey. Exterminate.”

Finally, one of the Dalek humans spoke, and it was a word Rose had never heard come out of a Dalek’s mouth—at least, not like this.

“Why?”

“Daleks do not question orders,” the Dalek said imperiously.

“But… why?” the same hybrid questioned.

The Dalek rolled back and forth slightly. “You will stop this.”

The hybrid and the Dalek looked at each other. “But why?”

“You must not question,” the Dalek insisted.

“But you are not our master. And we, we are not Daleks.”

“No, you’re not,” the Doctor said softly. “And you never will be.” He shoved his hands into his pockets and looked back at the Daleks. “Sorry. I got in the way of the lightning strike. Time Lord DNA got all mixed up. Just that little bit of freedom.”

“If they will not obey, then they must die.” The Dalek shot the human hybrid who’d refused to kill the Doctor.

The Doctor dove behind the seats. “Get down!” he shouted, and everyone huddled down for cover.

“Exterminate! Exterminate!”

Rose saw another Dalek human go down, but from the sound of things, some of them were getting
shots in on the Daleks too. The only thing that remained to be seen was if these weapons could pierce the shell of a Dalek.

“Exterminate!”

An explosion from the direction of the stage answered that question, and Rose clapped in victory. *One down, one to go.*

“Extermin—”

The remaining Dalek exploded mid-order, and the firing ceased. The Doctor jumped to his feet and jogged over to the closest hybrid. “It’s all right. It’s all right. It’s all right. You did it. You’re free.”

He looked down the line of Dalek humans. *A brand new species, ready to take its place in the universe.*

Before he could say anything, or start talking about where they might live, every single hybrid put their hands to their ears and writhed in pain. After screaming in agony for several seconds, they collapsed to the ground.

“No!” the Doctor shouted, running over to one. “They can’t! They can’t! They can’t! They can’t!”

Martha joined him beside the body. “What happened? What was that?”

“They killed them, rather than let them live.”

Rose put her hand on his shoulder, and he reached up to take it.


“Only two of the Daleks have been destroyed,” Laszlo said. “One of the Dalek masters must still be alive.”

The Doctor stood up slowly. “Oh, yes. In the whole universe, just one.”

Frank shifted his weight from one foot to the next and looked over his shoulder at the theatre doors. “I reckon I ought to get back to Hooverville,” he said. “Let people know things are turning out all right.”

The Doctor nodded, then looked at the devastation around him, turned around, and headed to the props room, the others following close behind. There was one Dalek left, and he knew exactly where he would find it.

The walk through the sewers was quiet. When they reached the entrance to the Daleks’ laboratory, the Doctor turned and held up his hand. “I’m going in there alone,” he said firmly. “He’s the last Dalek in existence, so he’ll be desperate. All of you, stay here. I’ll let you know when it’s safe to enter the room.”

He looked at each of them, then held Rose’s gaze until she nodded. Then he strode into the darkened room.

The Dalek was attached to the computer by cables. “Now what?” the Doctor asked bitterly.

“You will be exterminated.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.” The Doctor brushed aside the tired phrase. “Just think about it, Dalek—
what was your name?”

“Dalek Caan.”

“Dalek Caan.” The Doctor pushed his hands into his trouser pockets and walked forward. “Your entire species has been wiped out. And now the Cult of Skaro has been eradicated, leaving only you. Right now you’re facing the only man in the universe who might show you some compassion.”

Dalek Caan’s eyestalk shifted back and forth slightly as he watched the Doctor, as if he were thinking about what he was saying.

“Because I’ve just seen one genocide. I won’t cause another.” The Doctor looked at his greatest enemy and swallowed hard before saying the last thing he really wanted to say. “Caan, let me help you. What do you say?”

“Emergency temporal shift!” Caan cried out. The cables fell off of him and he disappeared, just before the Doctor could reach him.

The Doctor didn’t have time to brood about that, because Martha and Tallulah struggled to support a wheezing Laszlo into the room. “Doctor! Doctor!” Martha cried out. “He’s sick.”

He raised an eyebrow at Martha, and she nodded her head towards the door. The Doctor nodded and walked towards them.

Laszlo collapsed onto the floor in Tallulah’s arms. Martha felt for his pulse, still reassuring him. “It’s okay. You’re all right.” She looked at the Doctor. “It’s his heart. It’s racing like mad. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

The Doctor crouched down beside the group, and Tallulah looked up at him with tears in her eyes. “What is it, Doctor? What’s the matter with him? He says he can’t breathe. What is it?”

“It’s time, sweetheart,” Laszlo gasped out.

“What do you mean, time? What are you talking about?”

Laszlo looked up at Tallulah, love on his face as he gently explained what was happening. “None of the slaves survive for long. Most of them only live for a few weeks. I was lucky. I held on because I had you. But now… I’m dying, Tallulah.”

“No, you’re not,” she denied through tears. “Not now, after all this. Doctor, can’t you do something?”

“Oh, Tallulah with three Ls and an H, just you watch me.” The Doctor stood up and flung his coat off. “What do I need? Oh, I don’t know. How about a great big genetic laboratory?” He raised his eyebrows sardonically. “Oh look, I’ve got one.”

Martha grinned at him, and Tallulah watched hopefully as he started to drag equipment out into the open.

“Laszlo, just you hold on,” the Doctor ordered. “There’s been too many deaths today. Way too many people have died.” He mixed a solution, and when it started steaming, he grabbed the next component and added it. “Brand new creatures and wise old men and age old enemies. And I’m telling you, I’m telling you right now, I am not having one more death! You got that?” He lit the burner with the sonic, then pulled a stethoscope out of his pocket. “Not one. Tallulah, out of the way. The Doctor is in!”
After the Doctor stabilised Laszlo’s condition, he approached Rose cautiously. Her back was to him, and he started to reach out to put a hand on her shoulder, but then he remembered how upset she was.

“Rose?”

He flinched when she turned and leaned against the wall, her arms crossed over her chest. “You know,” she said, her voice dangerously even, “it occurs to me that after insisting I go inside to safety, you were the one that got struck by lightning. If you’d've let me stay and work with you, we probably could have gotten all the Dalekanium removed and then you wouldn’t have had to play lightning rod.”

The Doctor sighed. “I told you; my body can handle being struck by lightning. And you had a job of your own to do—taking care of the pig men wasn’t exactly nothing.”

“Martha could’ve handled the pig men herself,” Rose countered. “The whole plan was her idea anyway.”

The Doctor remained implacable. “That doesn’t change the fact that if you’d been on the mast with me, you might have been electrocuted.”

“Well, sending me away didn’t keep me from knowing exactly what it felt like.” Her eyes widened as soon as the words left her mouth, and she spun away from him.

“Rose?” he said quietly. Instead of turning, she curled in on herself. “Please look at me,” he pleaded.

She turned around slowly, and the tears on her face were a gut-punch. “Oh, Rose;” he murmured as he pulled her into his arms. He stroked her hair and paid attention to the chaotic emotions roiling within her. One memory was playing on repeat in her mind, and seeing it added to his guilt—it was the moment he’d been struck by lightning.

It was several long minutes before she could talk. “This doesn’t mean I wasn’t angry,” she muttered. “You know how I feel about being sent away for my own good.”

The Doctor closed his eyes and rested his chin on the top of her head. He did know exactly how she felt about that, but this time, he refused to budge.

Her hold on him loosened. “And I had to stay angry, because I knew as soon as I let it go, I’d be a mess. I couldn’t afford to break down when we were in the theatre.”

“I’m sorry, love,” the Doctor said. “You have no idea how much I wish there’d been another way. I couldn’t let the Daleks succeed, but if I’d known it would hurt you this much, I…”

Rose shook her head adamantly. “You still don’t get it. It wasn’t about the physical pain—I mean, yes it hurt, but I only felt it right at the moment. It faded almost immediately.” She ran her hands over the lapels of his jacket, tugging and straightening them.

The Doctor stilled her hands. “Tell me what’s bothering you, Rose. Please.”

“I didn’t know what had happened to you! I mean, I knew you’d been…” She swallowed. “Then we climbed up to the mast, and you were unconscious, and that’s three times this week that I’ve found you like that.”
The Doctor winced; that hadn’t occurred to him.

“And by the way, a bit more warning than a vague apology would have been nice.” Rose tapped him lightly on the chest. “Feeling like I’d been hit by a bolt of lightning out of the blue was not a pleasant experience. And if you’d told me what you were planning, I would’ve known what happened and what to expect when I found you.”

“I just…” The Doctor rubbed at the back of his neck. “I didn’t tell you because I thought it would be less alarming if you didn’t know.”

Rose tilted her head and looked at him. “No,” she corrected. “That’s part of it, but mostly I think you didn’t tell me because you didn’t want to give me a chance to argue.”

He opened his mouth to debate the point, but no words came. “You’re right,” he admitted after a moment of silence. He lowered his head, then looked up at her meekly. “Next time, I’ll tell you what’s going to happen—assuming it isn’t a surprise to me, too.”

“Thank you.” She sighed and some of the fight drained out of her. “I know you had to do it,” she admitted. “But you sent me away to keep me safe and instead you got hurt and I was so scared. I know it sounds silly, I mean I could tell you were alive, but…”

The Doctor put a hand under her chin and gently turned her face back to look at him. “It does not sound silly,” he told her firmly. “It sounds wonderful and compassionate and so you.” Rose looked sceptical, so he continued, determined not to let her feel self-conscious over this. And, okay, so maybe he wanted to distract her from the debate over him sending her away. “Honestly, Rose, you’re in a much better state than I would be if our positions were reversed.”

Choosing just one memory to prove his point, he let her see the helpless anger he’d felt when he’d seen her after the Wire had taken her face. Her embarrassment faded as she took in how distraught he had been.

Cupping Rose’s face in his hands, the Doctor leaned down and rested his forehead against hers. She drew in a deep, shuddering breath, and the Doctor projected as much love and calm as he could. Slowly, he felt her chaotic emotions come back under her control. When it seemed like she was as calm as could be expected, he pulled back and looked her in the eye.

“Better?” he asked, rubbing his thumbs over her cheeks.

“Yeah.” She looked over his shoulder at the empty platform where Dalek Caan had been controlling the hybrids. “He’s falling through Time, Doctor. And he won’t escape unscathed.”

“Emergency temporal shift,” the Doctor told her. “It’s a rubbish way to travel, really—who knows where he’ll end up, or what it’ll do to him?”

Rose nodded absently. “It won’t be just his body this time though, Doctor,” she said. “It’s gonna tear his mind apart.”

The Doctor repressed a shiver. He could feel the timelines flowing around them, and he knew Dalek Caan had reminded Rose of something she’d seen when she was Bad Wolf. With an effort, he held back his questions—he didn’t really want to know how the last Dalek would play into their lives.

Rose shook her head and blinked, then looked at Tallulah and Laszlo. “Do they know what they’re going to do?”
The Doctor nodded. “We’re going back to Hooverville. Laszlo’s going to ask if they’ll let him live there.”

“And then home?”

“And then home.”

After getting Laszlo settled in Hooverville, the Doctor, Rose, and Martha caught the ferry back to Bedloe’s Island.

“Do you reckon it’s going to work, those two?” Martha asked as they walked back to the TARDIS, breaking the silence that had settled over them when they’d left Manhattan.

“I don’t know.” The Doctor turned around and looked back at the skyline. “Anywhere else in the universe, I might worry about them, but New York—that’s what this city’s good at. Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, and maybe the odd pig slave Dalek mutant hybrid too.”

Rose and Martha laughed. “The pig and the showgirl,” Rose said.

He grinned down at her. “The pig and the showgirl.”

“It just proves it, I suppose,” Martha said. “There’s someone for everyone.”

The Doctor wrapped his arm more tightly around Rose as they walked towards the TARDIS. “Yeah. Yeah, I reckon there is.” She stretched up and brushed a kiss over his lips, and he finally let go of the last bit of tension he’d been hanging onto since they’d argued.

“Martha, would you care to do the honours?” He pointed at the TARDIS.

Martha’s jaw dropped, and she pulled her key out of her pocket. She stuck it in the lock, then looked back at them before opening the door. “Meant to say, I’m sorry.”

“What for?” Rose asked.

“Just because that Dalek got away. I know what that means to you,” she said on a rush. “Think you’ll ever see it again?”

The Doctor glanced at Rose, remembering what she’d said earlier. “Oh, yes. One day.”
A Time to Rest

Chapter 19: A Time to Rest

When Rose woke up the next morning, the Doctor was already gone—and unlike the day before, his mood was heavy and brooding. Her heart ached. He stayed with her more nights than not, claiming her required four hours wasn’t too much downtime.

But even when he got up in the middle of the night, he was almost always in bed when she got up, unless he was upset about something. Meeting the Daleks so soon after the Face of Boe’s claim that there was another Time Lord somewhere in the universe had him more on edge than he had been since… since Canary Wharf.

Rose got out of bed and grabbed her dressing gown, then followed their bond to the Doctor. He was facing away from her when she entered the console room, sitting on the jump seat, staring at the time rotor.

He sighed when she draped her arms around his shoulders. “Love you,” she murmured, then kissed his neck. He took her hand and pulled her around to sit beside him.

“I didn’t wake you up, did I?” he asked her.

Rose rested her head on his shoulder and took his hand in hers. “No, I wasn’t tired anymore. I woke up and thought I’d come find you.”

The Doctor nodded, and Rose kept quiet, waiting for him to speak.

“There’s still one out there,” he said bitterly.

“I know.”

“Every time I think we’ve finally seen the last of them, they come back. Over and over again.”

“I know.”

The Doctor jiggled his leg, and Rose thought quickly, trying to come up with some kind of distraction before his anxious energy boiled over. She glanced around the room, and when her gaze landed on the console, she smiled.

“You know, Doctor,” she said, keeping her voice light. “Martha probably won’t be up for another three hours, and I don’t think either of us are going to get any more sleep.”

He cast her a sidelong glance. “Do you have something in mind to fill the time?”

Rose stood up and ran her fingers over the controls. “Well… you could teach me a little bit about TARDIS maintenance.”

The Doctor leaned back in the jump seat and crossed his arms over his chest. “That was not where I expected this conversation to go,” he muttered.

It only took Rose a moment to parse out what he meant, and she smiled at him, letting him see a hint of her tongue. “Oh, console room sex is definitely on my to-do list, but I’m pretty sure she’ll only allow it in cases of life-or-death reunions.”
He raked his hand through his hair. “It’s a bit disturbing that we have enough of those for the condition to not actually eliminate the possibility.” He sighed and stood up. “So, maintenance lessons it is.”

“I’m gonna go get dressed first. I’ll be right back.”

The Doctor nodded absently, his mind split between thinking about where he should start Rose’s maintenance lessons and wondering when they’d see Dalek Caan again. Because even with just one Dalek left, the universal Sod’s law guaranteed they would run into each other.

“Stop brooding.”

He looked up and smiled weakly at Rose, now dressed in jeans and an old t-shirt, with her hair pulled back in a practical ponytail. “It’s one of the things I do best, though.”

“And don’t I know it,” she said gently. “Come on, you were going to show me how to take care of our ship.”

The Doctor pulled up the grating. “After you.”

Two hours later, the Doctor followed Rose out from under the console, unable to stop a smile when he looked at her. With a bit of grease on her face instead of makeup, she looked adorably disheveled.

Rose shot him a grin. “You gear heads are all the same,” she teased as she used a rag to wipe oil off her hands. “Get a girl underneath your car…”

The Doctor rolled his eyes. “The TARDIS is a bit more than a car,” he pointed out.

“Really?” Rose put a hand on her chest. “I hadn’t noticed. Is that why we’re able to go anywhere in time and space?”

“All right, Miss Cheeky, I think you’ve got just enough time for a shower before Martha wakes up. Most likely.”

Rose winked saucily and started down the corridor, but stopped when the Doctor called her name.

“Where do you want to go today? We talked about going to the moon a while back, what do you say?”

She spun around and walked backwards while answering. “I was thinking a more… domestic destination.”

“Oh, Earth?” the Doctor complained. “But we just left Earth.”

She chuckled. “More like the media room. I’m thinking a movie day, with popcorn and candy and pyjamas for Martha and I. You, of course, may stay in your suit.”

“So generous of you,” the Doctor grumbled, but truthfully, a slow day in the TARDIS sounded like exactly what he needed. “I’ll go make breakfast and meet you in the media room.”

“All right. I won’t be long.”
Martha slept until 8:30, which after years of school and work felt almost decadent. She showered and put her clothes back on before finding her way to the galley, which was surprisingly empty.

She only hesitated for a moment before she opened the fridge and rummaged around until she found a yogurt. It felt a little odd to be foraging for food, but she reminded herself that the TARDIS was her home now and forced the discomfort down.

“Oh, good!” Rose’s voice startled her, and she looked up to find her in the doorway, holding a tray of dirty dishes. “The TARDIS told me you were awake. I hoped you would be helping yourself. Anything you find in the galley is fair game, Martha.” She set the tray down on the counter. “Well… the Doctor does have an unspoken rule against eating the last biscuit.”

“Somehow, that doesn’t surprise me.” Martha tilted her head and looked at the other woman. “You’re still in your pyjamas.”

“Yeah… we thought we’d have a quiet day in, if that’s all right? The last two trips have been…”

Rose clammed up, but Martha could fill in the blanks. A reminder of his lost planet, followed immediately by meeting the alien race who led to their destruction?

“Sounds good to me,” she said easily. “I don’t suppose the wardrobe room has a pyjama section.”

Rose laughed. “Does she ever. The TARDIS is telepathic, so when you go inside, just tell her what you want and she’ll help you find it.” She giggled. “Sometimes her interpretation of your request is a little puzzling, but she does pretty good most of the time.”

Martha paused with her mug halfway to her lips. “Your ship is telepathic?” she asked, even as she berated herself for not figuring that out.

An unreadable expression crossed Rose’s face, and for a moment, Martha worried she’d offended her. Then she thought about the idea of a telepathic ship getting in her head, and she bit back the apology that was on the tip of her tongue.

“I don’t believe it,” Rose muttered. “I’m turning into him. Unbelievable.” She huffed out a breath, then smiled at Martha. “She is, and the wardrobe room isn’t the only place that crops up. For one, she’s got a translation matrix that’ll translate alien languages in your head. You won’t even know the people are speaking a foreign language, and they won’t know you’re speaking English.”

Martha nodded slowly. “And if I go to the wardrobe room this morning, she’ll know I need pyjamas and help me find a pair.” A memory came to her, something that had struck her as odd at the time, but had been easily dismissed. “Hang on, that’s why you took me straight to a rack of clothes I might’ve bought for myself.”

“Yeah. I’m so used to following the TARDIS’ directions, it didn’t even occur to me to say something.” Rose held her hands out, palms up, and shrugged her shoulders. “Sorry.”

Martha mulled it over for a moment, letting the idea sink into her head. She was travelling in time and space with an alien couple in a ship that was bigger on the inside—was a telepathic wardrobe really going to be the thing that she couldn’t handle?

“It’s convenient, I’ll give you that,” she said finally.

Rose grinned. “I love it,” she said honestly. “I’ve gotten so used to it that regular houses seem… empty.”
Martha didn’t know quite what to say in response to that.

“Anyway, the TARDIS can be easy to get lost in, but I’ve asked her to help you out today.” She beckoned to Martha, and when she’d joined her at the galley door, Rose pointed at the two more doors across the hallway. “The one on the right is the wardrobe room, and the one on the left is the media room. I’ll give you a proper tour later so you know where they usually are, but this saves us some time today.”

The idea that whole rooms could be moved around in this ship, like some kind of Hogwarts, felt even more alien to Martha than a telepathic translation circuit. She swallowed hard and nodded. “Got it.”

Rose patted her shoulder. “You’ll get used to it, Martha, I promise. We wouldn’t have asked you to come along if we didn’t think you could adjust to life in the TARDIS.”

That promise made Martha feel a little better, and she managed a genuine smile. “All right. I’ll see you in a bit.”

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The Doctor watched bemusedly as Rose slumped onto the couch, her face in her hands. She didn’t seem… upset—she was almost amused, actually.

“Rose?”

“Nothing… just…” She parted her fingers and peeked out at him. “It’s possible I owe you the teensiest apology.”

His lips quirked up in a smile. “Oh? What for?”

Rose lowered her hands and traced a finger over the pattern in the upholstery. “Wellll… I was just talking to Martha about the TARDIS, an’ it seems I never told her she’s telepathic.”

The Doctor tipped his head back and laughed. “Slipped your mind, did it?” he teased.

“Maybe. I’ve just gotten so used to talking to her; I forgot most humans aren’t accustomed to telepathy.” She leaned against him, her warm human body curled against his side. “So, sorry for getting so upset with you back then.”

The Doctor wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “Don’t be. The way you stood up to me so fearlessly was the first thing that made me fall for you.”

Rose looked up at him incredulously. “You’re joking.”

“Nope.” She looked at him, obviously expecting an explanation, and he sighed. “You were never afraid to tell me when you thought I was wrong, even though I had the keys and could’ve just left you there if I’d wanted.”

“You’d never do that to a companion,” she said automatically.

“No, but you had no way of knowing that back then. You just… you felt safe enough with me to challenge me, right when I thought I was completely unworthy of that kind of trust.”

Rose pulled her feet up on the couch and leaned into him. “I never doubted that you were a good man, Doctor.”
The Doctor’s throat closed up. *Rose*... He closed his eyes and pressed a kiss to her temple. *Meeting you was the best thing that ever happened to me.* She tilted her head back so she could look at him, and he brushed his thumb over her lips. *You’ve helped me become a better person than I was before.*

He locked down his feeling of unworthiness as best as he could, but he knew she’d caught a hint of it. Her mouth opened, probably to argue that he’d been good before they met, or that he’d helped her just as much as she’d helped him, and he shifted his hand from her shoulder to the back of her neck and kissed her tenderly.

Moving his lips against hers, the Doctor poured all of his love and adoration over the bond. This was his *Rose*, his precious girl, the Bad Wolf who protected her mate. He’d been lost in the darkness when they met, and her light had redeemed him.

The Doctor gentled the kiss and ended it with a series of soft pecks against her lips before pulling back just far enough to see her face. He watched her eyes flutter open, and knew immediately that he had not distracted her from her argument.

“Doctor…”

The door opened before Rose got any further. Martha took one step inside, then paused. “Am I interrupting something?” she asked.

“Nope!” the Doctor said, putting a little bit more space between himself and Rose. “What do you want to watch, Martha? We’ve got access to every channel available through intergalactic cable, and thousands of films.” He pointed to the shelves against the wall, and Martha wandered across the room to look them over.

A soft hand squeezed his knee, and the Doctor looked over at Rose. One of her eyebrows was arched, and he smiled innocently at her. She just shook her head. *We’ll talk about this later.*
The Hollow Man

Martha frowned as she looked at her two outfit choices. Thanks to their time slogging through the New York sewers, the hem of her jeans was filthy. Besides, she’d worn her top multiple days in a row and it could definitely do with a wash. The outfit from the wardrobe room wasn’t much better—it reeked of exhaust from their trip to New Earth. *Right, time to take care of this,* she thought as she put her own clothes on. *A limited wardrobe won’t cut it if I’m staying long-term.*

“Martha!” the Doctor said when she entered the console room. “Is there anyplace you’d like to go this morning?”

She smiled; it was almost like he’d anticipated her request. “Actually, could we go to my flat?”

The Doctor looked up from the controls in surprise and disappointment. “I thought you were going to stay a while,” he said.

“I’d like to, yeah—but I’d also like to not be wearing the same clothes every day. It’s been what… five days?” She shook her head. “I can’t even keep track with you. If we could just stop by long enough for me to pack a bag, that’s all.”

“Of course we can, Martha,” Rose said from the jump seat. “You’re always welcome to use the wardrobe room, and the TARDIS can give you all the toiletries you need, but I don’t blame you for wanting your own things.”

The Doctor still looked slightly puzzled, but what could you expect from a man who alternated between two suits? He shrugged and nodded at Martha. “All right then, where’s your flat?”

Martha gave him her address, then watched him and Rose fly the TARDIS together. The ship cooperated perfectly today, with a minimal amount of turbulence and a soft landing.

The Doctor bounced lightly on his toes, nodding at the door. “There we go. Perfect landing. Which isn’t easy in such a tight spot.”

“We’re in my flat?” Martha double-checked.

“In fact, the morning after we left, so you’ve only been gone about twelve hours.” He held a hand up to Rose. “And yes, I’m sure this time,” he told her, a long-suffering expression on his face.

Martha looked at Rose with raised eyebrows, and she laughed. “The first time he brought me home, he thought it was twelve hours… but it had been twelve months. That’s not a driving mistake he’ll ever live down.”

The Doctor rolled his eyes. “You make a mistake once…”

Rose tapped her chin with her index finger. “And then there was Cardiff instead of Naples, and 1879 instead of 1979…”

He heaved a sigh and nodded at the door. “Go on, Martha, you’ll see.”

Martha pushed the door open, then turned back to them in amazement. “I don’t know why it’s more incredible that you could land in my flat than it was to visit Shakespeare,” she said as she stepped out of the TARDIS, “but somehow it is.”
“There’s something about coming back and realising you’ve been all those places, but nothing’s changed at home,” Rose said.

Martha grabbed the lingerie off the drying rack before the Doctor stepped out of the TARDIS, then reached into a cupboard and retrieved a duffle. “So all the stuff we’ve done. Shakespeare, New New York, old New York?” she asked as she shoved her unmentionables into the bag.

The Doctor looked up from the photograph of her family he’d been inspecting. “Yep, all in one night.” He looked around her apartment, his innate curiosity just as insatiable here as it was on an alien planet. “Relatively speaking. Everything should be just as it was. Books, CDs…”

“That is so… mental.” Martha headed towards her bedroom, but the answering machine stopped her in the doorway.

“Martha, are you there? Pick it up, will you?”

Instead, she rolled her eyes and continued into her room. “It’s Mum. It’ll wait,” she muttered.

Not surprisingly, her mum didn’t give up. “All right then, pretend that you’re out if you like. I was only calling to say that your sister’s on TV.” Martha’s attention was finally piqued, and she stuck her head back into the living room. “On the news of all things. Just thought you might be interested.”


“How could Tish end up on the news?” Martha tapped the remote against her chin and furrowed her brow.

“Tonight,” the gentleman continued, “I will demonstrate a device which will redefine our world.”

“She’s got a new job,” Martha told the Doctor and Rose. “PR for some research lab.”

“With the push of a single button, I will change what it means to be human.” Reporters called out to him, but Martha put the TV back on standby and went back into her bedroom.

“Guess I should get this packing done so we can move on,” she said. “Any special kind of clothes I should bring?”

The Doctor ignored her, still staring at the now dark television. Martha looked at Rose, who said, “Just pack whatever you’d normally take on a trip, Martha. If we need something special, we can get it out of the wardrobe room.”

Rose’s voice brought the Doctor out of his daze. “No, I’m sorry. Did he say he was going to change what it means to be human?” he asked, pointing at the television.

Rose grinned at him, excitement lighting her eyes. “A short delay, maybe, before taking off?” she suggested.

“I think so,” he agreed. “Martha, are you up for it?”

Martha’s dark eyes sparkled. “Absolutely! Let me call Mum and see what she can tell me about Tish’s new job.”

The Doctor wandered through the flat while Martha was on the phone, absently picking up a CD off the mantle and a paperweight from the desk before Rose took them out of his hands and set them
“So that man, Professor Lazarus, runs the laboratory she works for,” Martha said, interrupting their conversation. “And tonight, he and Lady Thaw are throwing a party to demonstrate the launch of his new invention.”

“What will change what it means to be human,” Rose quoted.

Martha nodded. “Apparently, yeah. Tish managed to get all the family on the guest list.” She glanced at the Doctor and Rose. “I’m allowed a plus one, but…”

“We’ll use the psychic paper; don’t worry,” the Doctor said.

“Great. The dress code is black tie for you, and cocktail dresses for Rose and I.”

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“This tux is unlucky.”

Rose rolled her eyes while carefully styling her hair in a sleek, modern up-do. That was at least the tenth time the Doctor had said that since Martha had informed them of the dress code.

“Whenever I wear this, something bad always happens.”

“That’s not the tux, Doctor—that’s just you.” Rose took one last look at her hair and makeup, then tied her dressing gown around her waist and left the en suite.

The Doctor sputtered over her comeback while he fought with the tie. “Are you saying bad things always happen around me?” He pouted, and undid the tie again. “Was our trip to Barcelona bad?”

“Are you saying you’re always wearing a tux when bad things happen?” Rose countered. She pulled his hands away from the strip of silk before it became hopelessly wrinkled and quickly did his tie herself.

“How did you get so good at that?” he asked as he peered at his reflection in the mirror.

“I used to practice when I worked at Henrik’s. Salesgirls in menswear got a much better commission,” she told him, watching appreciatively as he pulled his jacket on. Rose brushed her hands across his shoulders, then tugged at the lapels, making sure the jacket hung correctly on his frame.

The Doctor raised an eyebrow at her, and she realised her hands had come to rest on his chest. “See something you like, love?” he said with a smirk.

Rose shook her head. “I’m going to the wardrobe room to get dressed. I’ll meet you in the console room in thirty minutes.”

Her one request to the TARDIS was for a dress she could run in—nothing too long, or too tight around the legs. If someone wanted to change what it meant to be human, it seemed almost guaranteed that they’d be running before the night was over. Rose’s seventeen-year-old self, with a wardrobe full of tight clubbing outfits, would have been appalled by her new standards. But adult Rose could appreciate a dress that was sexy and easy to run in.

The ship helpfully directed her to a rack of knee-length cocktail dresses that all had swishy chiffon skirts. Most of them were variations on a theme: wide straps, plunging neckline, pleated bodice, then
an A-line skirt, all in the same black, navy, and burgundy. None of them struck Rose’s fancy.

She paused halfway down the rack on a dress whose wide straps were made of soft lace. The back of the dress fastened with a zipper that ended at the middle of the back and a button at the back of the neck, creating a keyhole opening framed by the same lace.

But it was the colour that caught her eye. The silky cobalt blue chiffon seemed to shimmer in varying shades of blue and deep teal as the light caught it from different angles. It was completely unique, especially compared to everything else on the rack.

Rose took her dressing gown off and hung it by the door, then changed into the dress. The fabric whispered around her knees as she walked barefoot to a rack of shoes and selected silver heels low enough to run in with a strap around the ankle to keep them from slipping off.

She sat down on the low divan to put them on, then stood and examined the full effect in the mirror. The wide expanse of bare skin across her chest drew a frown, but the TARDIS had hidden all the jewellery except her wedding earrings, which she quickly put on. Shrugging, she grabbed a small matching handbag and left the wardrobe room.

The Doctor was polishing the time rotor when she entered the console room, but he dropped the cloth when he heard her footsteps on the ramp. “There you are! I was just…”

The rest of his sentence trailed off into nothing when he caught sight of her, and Rose stopped to do a quick twirl, her lips curving up in a smile when his gaze dropped to her legs.

She crossed the room, not stopping until she was only a foot away from him. “See something you like, love?”

“Oh, yes. Definitely, absolutely.” He put a hand on her waist and bent his head to brush his lips against hers.

Rose slid a hand up his chest and over his shoulder to play with the short hairs at the nape of his neck, and the hand on her waist flexed. A moment later, she felt his tongue gliding along the seam of her lips, and she parted them willingly, letting him deepen the kiss.

My beautiful Rose, he said as he teased her with his tongue.

Rose’s response was tempered by a sudden awareness of time. They were still in Martha’s flat, which meant they were stuck in one time stream. Reluctantly, she pulled back from the Doctor.

“Martha will be expecting us,” she said, surprised by the huskiness in her voice. Regret crossed his face quickly, but he loosened his hold on her enough for her to take a step back.

He traced a single finger along her collarbone, making Rose shiver. “You should really wear a necklace with this dress,” he commented, his eyes sparkling.

“Well, tell our lovely ship that,” Rose retorted. “I looked for something, but she seems to have hidden it all.”

Gleeful excitement pulsed over the bond, and Rose narrowed her eyes at the Doctor. What is he up to? she wondered.

He didn’t make her wonder long. “That’s too bad.” He pulled something out of his jacket pocket, then opened his hand to dangle something in front of her. “Do you think this would work?”
Rose gaped at the delicate silver necklace. “Diamonds?” she asked as she touched the three stones set in a v.

“Yep. I saw it and thought of you, since diamond is April’s birthstone.”

Rose smiled. “Thank you, Doctor. Put it on me?” she requested, turning her back to him. The necklace dropped down in front of her eyes until it rested against her chest. She shivered when she felt the Doctor’s cool fingers fumble with the clasp before he got it to latch. A sigh escaped her lips when he kissed nape of her neck, then wrapped his arms around her waist.

“Happy birthday, Rose.”

She gasped and spun around. “What?”

Mirth danced in his eyes. “I thought you might have lost track. Today’s your 23rd birthday, or would be if we lived linearly.” He offered her his arm. “Come on, I think Martha is waiting for us.”

The Doctor felt exceedingly smug as he escorted his bond mate out of the TARDIS. She wasn’t easy to surprise, and he’d certainly managed this time. He’d been a little worried that he might have jarred her memory when he told Martha exactly how long Rose had been with him, given that she’d celebrated her first birthday on the TARDIS only seven weeks after moving in.

Rose said nothing about his self-satisfaction. He’d pulled off the perfect surprise; he deserved the moment of pride.

Martha was waiting for them on her sofa, but she stood up when they walked in, brushing a hand down her aubergine skirt. Rose smiled when she noticed the familiar wide straps, deep v neckline, and chiffon skirt—Martha had looked for a dress that would be easy to run in too, it seemed.

“I love that necklace, Rose,” Martha said.

Rose rested her fingers on it and looked up at the Doctor. The warmth in his eyes made her weak in the knees, and she leaned into him. “It was a birthday present.”

“Is today your birthday? Why didn’t you say?”

She shrugged. “Well… I’d actually lost track.”

“Come on, ladies,” the Doctor interrupted. “Time to go save the world.”

Martha made a face at him. “Do you have to be so dramatic?” she complained, drawing a laugh from Rose. “You don’t know this machine is world-threatening.”

The Doctor and Rose exchanged a glance. There was a wrongness in the timelines pulling at them and demanding they fix it. “I suppose not,” he said evasively. “But! There’s bound to be nibbles at the party, if nothing else. Now come on!”

oOoOoOoOo

After parking the car, Martha led them to a building with a Greek facade, complete with Ionic columns supporting the portico. Other people dressed in formal attire were filing towards the steps, where a red carpet led to the door. An elegant sign by the entrance welcomed them to the gala, with pictures of their hosts, Richard Lazarus and Lady Thaw.

A rather harried-looking woman holding a clipboard stood just inside the doorway, checking
invitations against the guest list. Martha smiled at her when it was her turn. “I’m Martha Jones,” she said, showing her ID. “I don’t have an invitation, but my sister Letitia said she put my name on the list.”

The woman ran her finger down the list, then smiled at Martha. “Of course, Miss Jones. Please, have a good evening.”

Martha looked up at the Doctor. “I’m going to see if I can find my family,” she said. “I’ll see you in a bit.”

The woman taking invitations looked at the Doctor next and he held out the psychic paper. “I’m the Doctor, and this is my wife, Rose Tyler.”

He expected her to wave them in, as people usually did when they saw the psychic paper, but instead, she checked her list. That made the Doctor a little nervous, but a moment later, she smiled and nodded. “Ah, here we are. The Doctor and Rose Tyler—personal guests of Mr. Saxon. Thank you for coming.”

After they were past the receiving line, Rose muttered, “Something we’ll have to take care of, then?”

“All once we figure out who Mr. Saxon is.”

All thoughts of the mysterious Mr. Saxon were driven from the Doctor’s mind when they entered the main room, dominated by a large, frosted glass chamber. He and Rose wandered towards it.

*Sonic technology,* he realised as he got closer.

A server approached, and the tray of hors d’oeuvres distracted him. “I was right, Rose—they’ve got nibbles!” he chirped, taking several from her as she passed by. “I love nibbles.” The server returned his smile, then walked away.

Rose snagged one out of his hand. “We managed to skip dinner,” she said. “I’m starved.”

“I’m glad I took time to eat before I got dressed,” Martha said, rejoining them. “I couldn’t find my family—but oh, it looks like someone found me.”

Rose watched with interest as a beautiful woman about her own age approached Martha, a huge smile on her face.

“Hello,” she said.

Martha took a step towards her. “Tish.”

The sisters hugged, then Tish stepped back and took in Martha’s appearance. “You look great. So, what do you think?” she asked, indicating to the room. “Impressive, isn’t it?”

Martha looked around and nodded. “Very.”

Tish tilted her head and narrowed her eyes. “And two nights out in a row for you,” she said, a curious smile on her face. “That’s dangerously close to a social life.”

Martha rolled her eyes. “If I keep this up, I’ll end up in all the gossip columns.”

“You might, actually.” Tish glanced around the room. “You should keep an eye out for photographers. And Mum, she’s coming too. Even dragging Leo along with her.”
Martha’s eyes widened. “Leo in black tie? That I must see.”

Tish’s eyes darted over to Rose and the Doctor, and Rose waited for Martha to introduce them.

“This is, er, the Doctor and his wife, Rose Tyler.”

The Doctor put all his hors d'oeuvres in one hand so he could shake Tish’s with the other. “Hello.”

“Are they with you?” Tish asked Martha, a fake smile painted across her face.

“Yeah.”

“But they’re not on the list. How did they get in?”

“We were, actually,” Rose said. “Mr. Saxon put us on the list.”

Tish looked like she still wanted to argue, but the Doctor jumped in before she had a chance. “So, this Lazarus, he’s your boss?”

“Professor Lazarus, yes,” Tish said, apparently deciding not to question their presence any more. “I’m part of his executive staff.”

“She’s in the PR department,” Martha said dismissively.

Tish narrowed her eyes, and her nostrils thinned. “I’m head of the PR department, actually.”

Martha’s eyes widened. “You’re joking.”

“I put this whole thing together,” she said, nodding at the party going on around them.

“So do you know what the professor’s going to be doing tonight?” the Doctor asked, distracting them from the outbreak of sibling rivalry. “That looks like it might be a sonic microfield manipulator.”

Tish rolled her eyes. “He’s a science geek—no wonder you’re friends.” She smiled at all of them. “Got to get back to work now. I’ll catch up with you later,” she added to Martha.

The Doctor looked at Rose after she walked away. “Science geek? What does that mean?”

She tugged on his lapel. “Means you like to impress us all with your rambling lectures on hypersonic sound waves and their effects on human biology.”

He raised his eyebrows. You’ve been paying attention to my thoughts. Just wanted to know what was going on.

“Martha.”

Martha spun around at the familiar voice and launched herself into her mother’s arms. “Mum!” Her mum stroked her hair, and Martha relished the soft, familiar comfort.

She pulled back after a minute, and mother and daughter looked at each other. “All right, what’s the occasion?” Francine asked.

Martha froze for a moment. “What do you mean? I’m just pleased to see you, that’s all.”

Her mum smiled and tilted her head curiously. “You saw me last night.”
Rose cut in. “Martha’s enthusiastic greeting is probably my fault, Mrs. Jones. I…” She swallowed, and the Doctor wrapped his arm around her waist. “I lost my mother about about ten months ago, and we were talking about that earlier today.”

Martha smiled at Rose, hoping she could see the gratitude in her eyes. “Yeah, it just reminded me that you never know how much time you’ll have with the people you love.”

Her mum still looked doubtful, so Martha turned to her brother, looking to get the attention off herself. “You’re looking good, Leo.”

“Yeah.” Leo huffed out a breath. “If anyone asks me to fetch them a drink, I’ll swing for him.”

Francine’s speculative gaze turned on Rose and the Doctor. “You disappeared last night,” she told Martha, a hint of accusation in her voice.

“I just went home,” Martha said, feeling like a teenager who’d been caught sneaking out.

“She did have a long day yesterday,” Rose pointed out evenly. “What with the hospital being transported to the moon and all.”

Martha wanted to hide when her mum looked down her nose at Rose. “And you are…?”

“I’m Rose Tyler, and this is my husband, the Doctor.”

“What’s your connection with my daughter?”

Rose sighed and looked at the Doctor before Martha could protest her mum’s interrogation. “Do you have our identification, Doctor?” she asked him.

The Doctor’s eyebrow quirked up slightly, but he handed his wife the psychic paper without question. Martha tried to catch a glimpse of it when Rose showed it to her mum, but she couldn’t without being totally obvious.

Francine blinked, then looked at the blank piece of paper and back at Rose. “But you’re…”

“We just needed to talk with Martha a little about what happened on the moon. The conversation took longer than we thought it would, and then we learned we were all invited to the same party, so we thought…” Rose shrugged. “Why not come together?”

“You’re brilliant, Rose,” the Doctor told her as he accepted the psychic paper back from her. She’d single-handedly smoothed over Martha’s faux pas and given them a logical cover for being in her life.

Someone clinked cutlery against a glass, and they all turned around to face the platform, where Professor Lazarus stood next to the large, freestanding chamber. “Ladies and gentlemen, I am Professor Richard Lazarus, and tonight I am going to perform a miracle. It is, I believe, the most important advance since Rutherford split the atom, the biggest leap since Armstrong stood on the moon.”

The Doctor crossed his arms over his chest. He knew his Earth history, and the human race didn’t make a scientific advancement of that magnitude for another fifteen years.

“Tonight, you will watch and wonder,” Lazarus continued as flashbulbs went off all around him. “Tomorrow, you will wake to a world which will be changed forever.”
He handed his cane to the woman in a lab coat who’d been standing behind him and stepped into the
chamber. His scientific team activated the device and a blinding light flashed over the room. The four
pistons around the chamber oscillated, focusing the light inward. An electronic shriek pierced the air,
and the whole unit spun faster and faster.

An alarm went off before the chamber stopped spinning. The Doctor looked over at the computer
terminals on his right, then back at the chamber. “Something’s wrong. It’s overloading.” He tensed,
and when sparks shot out of the console, he couldn’t wait any longer. He ran to the terminal to the
right of the unit and pulled out his sonic screwdriver. One look at the control panels was all he
needed to understand what was happening, and he quickly turned the dial on one and started pushing
the buttons that would bring it back within safe parameters.

“Somebody stop him. Get him away from those controls!” Lady Thaw cried out.

The Doctor gritted his teeth. “If this thing goes up, it’ll take the whole building with it,” he shouted
over the sound of the alarm. “Is that what you want?”

He was doing everything right, but he couldn’t get ahead of the rapidly destabilising sonic field.
Finally, he jumped over the desk and yanked a cable out of the back of the control panel, and the
device slowed, then stopped.

Martha and Rose ran to the door. “Get it open!” the Doctor yelled, racing around from the other side.

The smoke cleared, and a blond man in his late thirties staggered to his feet. He touched his face with
his hand and smiled, then tottered down the steps out to greet his public.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I am Richard Lazarus. I am seventy-six years old and I am reborn!”

The Doctor set his jaw as the guests all clapped wildly, and cameras flashed. Rose slipped her hand
into his. What is it?

It looks like everything went perfectly, but there’s no way he could possibly have accounted for all
the variables.

“It can’t be the same guy,” Martha said as they watched Lazarus pose for pictures with his rich and
important guests. “It’s impossible. It must be a trick.”

The Doctor shook his head. “Oh, it’s not a trick. I wish it were.”

Martha looked up at him, then back at Lazarus. “What just happened then?”

“He just changed what it means to be human,” the Doctor said gravely.

Is this the first step towards people like Lady Cassandra? Rose asked.

No. That, unfortunate as it is, is part of the history of the human race. This—he nodded to Lazarus
—is not supposed to happen.

Lady Thaw worked her way towards Lazarus, smiling politely at the young women crowding
around him. From where they were, they couldn’t overhear the conversation, but the Doctor watched
the interaction in interest. The older woman held her hands up to his face, and the Doctor thought he
saw a glimmer of disgust on Lazarus’ face.

After a minute of conversation, Lazarus stiffened and cracked his neck in a not-quite-human manner.
A waiter walked by, and he grabbed the tray out of his hands and started shoving the hors d’oeuvres
into his mouth one after another.

“Richard!” Lady Thaw protested.

“I’m famished.”

The Doctor led Rose and Martha over to the pair. “Energy deficit. Always happens with this kind of process,” he said, remembering how hungry regeneration usually left him.

Lazarus looked at him, his lips pursed. “You speak as if you see this every day, Mr.—?”

“Doctor.” He shoved his hands into his pockets and tried to shrug modestly. “And well, no, not every day, but I have some experience with this kind of transformation.”

“That’s not possible,” Lazarus told him with a superior smirk.

The Doctor looked up at the chamber. “Using hypersonic sound waves to create a state of resonance. That—that’s inspired.”

Some of Lazarus’ disdainful attitude faded. ‘You understand the theory, then.”

“Enough to know that you couldn’t possibly have allowed for all the variables,” the Doctor said flatly.

Whatever rapport he’d developed with Lazarus disappeared. “No experiment is entirely without risk,” the other man said, popping the last bite into his mouth and licking his fingers.

“That thing nearly exploded,” the Doctor retorted quietly. “You might as well have stepped into a blender.”

“Mr. Saxon said you would have an interest in the project, but neither your interest nor your connections give you leave to comment,” Lady Thaw told him quellingly.

Rose crossed her arms over her chest. “Excuse you, but if the Doctor hadn’t stopped it, that thing would have exploded.”

“Then I thank you, Doctor,” Lazarus condescended. “But that’s a simple engineering issue. What happened inside the capsule was exactly what was supposed to happen. No more, no less.”

“You’ve no way of knowing that,” Martha countered. “Not until you’ve run proper tests.”

Lazarus laughed, and his gaze flicked up and down the length of Martha’s figure. “Look at me. You can see what happened. I’m all the proof you need.”

“This device will be properly certified before we start to operate commercially,” Lady Thaw assured them.

“Commercially?” Rose and Martha chorused.

“You are joking,” Martha continued. “That’ll cause chaos.”

“Not chaos, change.” All of Lazarus’ amusement had disappeared. “A chance for humanity to evolve, to improve,” he concluded, looking back at the Doctor.

The blatant greed wrapped in a thin veneer of scientific progress sickened the Doctor. “This isn’t about improving. This is about you and your customers living a little longer.”
Lazarus’ smile was cool. “Not a little longer, Doctor. A lot longer. Perhaps indefinitely.”

“Richard, we have things to discuss, upstairs.”

Lazarus followed Lady Thaw, waving goodbye to the Doctor, Martha, and Rose. “Goodbye, Doctor.” He turned around to look at them once more. “In a few years, you’ll look back and laugh at how wrong you were.”

He took Martha’s hand and placed a kiss on the back of it, then followed his business partner upstairs.

The Doctor watched him go, shaking his head a little at the sheer arrogance of the man. “Oh, he’s out of his depth. No idea of the damage he might have done.”

“So what do we do now?” Rose asked.

“Now?” The Doctor looked around the room. The sign on the building had proclaimed this to be Lazarus Laboratories. “Well, this building must be full of laboratories. I say we do our own tests.”

Martha held up her hand. “Lucky I’ve just collected a DNA sample then, isn’t it?”

The Doctor grinned down at her. “Oh, Martha Jones, you’re a star.”

Martha turned to Rose as they walked to the lift. “I meant to say, thanks for stepping in with Mum earlier. You were brilliant.”

“Yeah, well I have a lot of experience recognising a mum on the warpath, thanks to the Doctor.” The women laughed over the Doctor’s protest.

The lift came, and they all got in. “So what happened to your mum, if you don’t mind me asking?” Martha questioned. “Or was that just a cover?”

Rose smiled sadly. “Canary Wharf.” Martha hummed in sympathy, and Rose shook her head. “It isn’t like that; she isn’t actually dead. But she’s trapped in a parallel universe, and I’ll never see her again.”

The Doctor looked at Rose curiously. “While we’re asking questions, Rose, who did you tell Martha’s mum we are?”

The lift doors opened on the second storey, and Rose waited to answer until they were walking down the corridor, following a sign that pointed to the laboratories.

Then she grinned at him, letting her tongue peek out. “Investigators with UNIT.”

The Doctor laughed. It was the simplest, most obvious cover, since the Brigadier had added a note about her to the Doctor’s file. “You are brilliant, Rose Tyler,” he proclaimed.

“Yeah, well, now it’s time for the two of you to be brilliant,” Rose told him, opening the door to a cool, sterile lab.

The Doctor put on his glasses, then swabbed the back of Martha’s hand, put the sample on a slide, and slid it under the microscope sitting on the table. He had to hack into the computer sitting next to the microscope to gain access to the program that read the results, but it only took a minute.

“Amazing,” he said once the DNA strand appeared on the monitor.
“What?” Martha whispered.

“Lazarus’s DNA.”

“I can’t see anything different,” Martha said, and Rose was grateful she wasn’t the only one.

“Look at it,” the Doctor insisted.

Rose and Martha both looked closer, and a second later, Rose caught a fluctuation in the structure of the DNA. “Oh, my God,” she breathed.

“Did that just change?” Martha asked.

The Doctor nodded, and Rose recognised the amazement on his face.

Martha took a half step back. “But it can’t have.”

“But it did,” Rose said, looking at the still shifting DNA.

Martha looked at her, then at the Doctor. “It’s impossible.”

“And that’s two impossible things we’ve seen so far tonight.” The Doctor grinned. “Don’t you love it when that happens?”

“That means Lazarus has changed his own molecular patterns,” Martha surmised.

“Hypersonic sound waves to destabilise the cell structure, then a mutagenic programme to manipulate the coding in the protein strands,” the Doctor said rapidly. “Basically, he hacked into his own genes and instructed them to rejuvenate.”

Martha looked at the computer again. “But they’re still mutating now.”

The Doctor’s giddy, “Oh look, something new!” excitement faded into serious concern, and Rose held her breath, waiting for him to explain what had gone wrong.

“Because he missed something. Something in his DNA has been activated and won’t let him stabilise. Something that’s trying to change him.”

The atmosphere in the room shifted from cool to chilly. “Change him into what?” Martha asked.

“I don’t know, but I think we need to find out,” the Doctor said quietly.

“They were going upstairs,” Rose said. “And the sign in the lift said executive offices are on the top floor.”

The Doctor nodded. “Let’s go.”

He dashed from the room, and Rose and Martha followed after him. The ride to the top of the building was short, and the lift opened directly onto a large, posh office that clearly belonged to the head of the company. A scale model of a cathedral sat on a table nearby, and the wooden desk was old and obviously expensive.

The Doctor flicked the lights on, and they could see the room more clearly.

“This is his office, all right,” Martha said.
The three of them turned around looking for their host, but the room seemed to be empty. “Then where is he?” Rose asked.

Martha shrugged. “Don’t know. Let’s try back at the re…ception.”

Rose and the Doctor looked at her as she stumbled over the word, and then followed her gaze. There was something behind the desk—something that looked like a skeletal leg wearing a ladies’ dress shoe.

The sight on the other side of the desk was more gruesome. A dried up skeleton dressed in a black formal gown lay on the floor with a cut glass tumbler beside her.

They all recognised the dress, but it was Martha who put it into words. “Is that Lady Thaw?”

“Used to be,” the Doctor agreed. “Now it’s just a shell. Had all the life energy drained out, like squeezing the juice out of an orange.”

“Lazarus,” Rose whispered.

The Doctor nodded. “Could be.”

“So he’s changed already?” asked Martha.

“Not necessarily,” the Doctor corrected. “You saw the DNA. It was fluctuating. The process must demand energy. This might not have been enough.”

“So he might do this again?” Martha asked, drawing the obvious conclusion.

The Doctor made a face, but that was enough for Martha. Her family was here, at a party with a mad scientist who was now more Hyde than Jekyll. She ran to the lift, not stopping to see if Rose and the Doctor were following, and punched the button for the first floor, where the party was.

Rose and the Doctor slipped in just as the doors closed. Martha paced the whole way down, tugging at her hair. “This cannot be happening,” she muttered.

“He did say he was going to change what it meant to be human,” Rose reminded her. “If we’d thought that sounded like a good idea, do you think we’d have stuck around just for the canapés?”

“Okay, fine. I thought there was something fishy going on too, but I didn’t think my family would end up at a party with an energy sucking leech who could turn them all into dried-out corpses!” she exclaimed.

“Calm down, Martha,” Rose advised. “We’ll be back at the party in a minute, and you’ll need to look pulled together.”

Martha wanted to glare at her friend, but she couldn’t. Rose was right. She took a few deep breaths before the lift stopped, then closed her eyes and breathed out slowly before stepping out.

“So what’s the plan?” she asked before they reentered the reception room.

“Find Lazarus, see if we can get him alone,” said the Doctor. “Talk to him about what we found. Hopefully he’ll see reason, and maybe there’s something we can do to keep this from getting any worse.”

Martha had been watching the Doctor, and he’d looked away from her when he’d said that bit. Oh, my God, there isn’t any way to reverse this, she realised. Lazarus was just going to keep getting
worse until he eventually transformed completely into… whatever he was changing into.

She took another breath when they reached the door. There would be time to panic later.

“I can’t see him,” she muttered as they walked past the string quartet.

“He can’t be far,” the Doctor said, striding through the crowd. “Keep looking.”

A familiar voice off to the left caught Martha’s attention, and she turned to her brother. “Hey, you all right, Marth?”

Martha didn’t bother trying to bluff Leo; he could always tell when she was upset. “Have you seen Lazarus anywhere?” she asked point blank.

He blinked, then nodded. “Yeah, well, he was getting cosy with Tish a couple of minutes ago.”

“With Tish?”

In Martha’s horror, she was only vaguely aware of the Doctor joining her, while Rose moved to intercept her mother. Rose said something in a low voice, but Martha stared at Leo.

“Where did they go?”


Rose stepped forward and took the Doctor’s hand. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Jones,” she said as they ran off. “I promise this is important.”

Martha looked over her shoulder as they left the reception room and winced when she recognised the confusion and mild irritation on her mother’s face.

This time, the ride in the lift was silent as they all watched the numbers go up. Finally, they reached the top floor and Martha burst out into the executive office as soon as they doors opened.

A quick glance told her the room was just as empty now as it had been five minutes ago. “Where are they?”

The Doctor pulled the sonic screwdriver out of his pocket. “Fluctuating DNA will give off an energy signature. I might be able to pick it up.” He held the sonic out in front of him and moved it in a slow pass around the room. After a quarter turn, it started beeping. “Got him.”

“Where?” Martha asked. The Doctor slowly moved the sonic until it pointed straight up. “But this is the top floor.” The answer came to her as she said the words. “The roof.”

“We’ll have to take the stairs,” Rose said as they sprinted for the corner of the room.

The roof was only a short flight of stairs up from the executive floor. The Doctor reached the door to the rooftop terrace first and held a finger up. “Let’s not surprise our friend,” he suggested in a low voice, then turned the handle slowly.

They slipped silently onto the roof and found Lazarus and Tish standing silhouetted in front of a cathedral. They stood quite close, and Lazarus was rambling about the experiment.

“I find that nothing’s ever exactly like you expect,” he said. “There’s always something to surprise you. Between the idea and the reality, between the motion and the act—”
“Falls the Shadow,” the Doctor said, finishing the quote.

Lazarus and Tish turned around. “So the mysterious Doctor knows his Eliot,” Lazarus said. A sardonic smile turned the corners of his lips upward. “I’m impressed.”

“Martha, what are you doing here?” Tish hissed.

“Tish, get away from him,” Martha ordered.

“What?” Tish recoiled slightly and glared at Martha. “Don’t tell me what to do.”

“I wouldn’t have thought you had time for poetry, Lazarus,” the Doctor said, “what with you being busy defying the laws of nature and all.”

“You’re right, Doctor.” Lazarus rocked back and forth on his heels. “One lifetime’s been too short for me to do everything I’d like. How much more I’ll get done in two or three or four.”

Rose snorted. “Do you really think it works like that?”

“She’s right,” the Doctor said, and Martha wasn’t surprised when she looked over and saw a sad expression on his face. “Some people live more in twenty years than others do in eighty. It’s not the time that matters; it’s the person.”

Lazarus’ eyes turned cold. “But if it’s the right person, what a gift that would be.”

“Or what a curse. Look at what you’ve done to yourself.”

Lazarus sneered. “Who are you to judge me?”

Martha motioned to her sister. “Over here, Tish.”

Tish’s eyes flashed. She stepped closer to Martha, but only so she could argue. “You have to spoil everything, don’t you?” Martha recoiled from her older sister’s accusation, but Tish didn’t give her a chance to defend herself or explain. “Every time I find someone nice, you have to go and find fault.”

In her anger, Tish didn’t hear Lazarus’ first choking spasms as he started to transform. “Tish, he’s a monster!” Martha said as Lazarus fell to the ground.

Tish rolled her eyes. “I know the age thing’s a bit freaky, but it works for Catherine Zeta-Jones.” She finally realised no one was looking at her, and turned around just in time to see Lazarus expand into a huge, skeletal scorpion with the head of a man. “What’s that?”

“Run!” the Doctor yelled, leading the way back to the stairwell. When they were all inside, he yanked the door shut and sonicked the lock so Lazarus wouldn’t be able to get through.

Martha reached the lifts first and slammed the button, then turned to her sister. “Are you okay?”

Tish stared at the door. “I was going to snog him.”

The main lights went out and emergency lights started flashing before anyone could comment on that. “Security one. Security one. Security one,” a computerised voice said over the loudspeaker.

“What’s happening?” Martha asked when the voice stopped.

“An intrusion.” Tish closed her eyes for a moment, then swallowed and looked at them. “It triggers a security lockdown. Kills most of the power. Stops the lifts, seals the exits.”
They all looked at the roof access door. “He must be breaking through that door,” the Doctor said. *And if the lifts are down...* “The stairs, come on!”

They’d only made it down one flight when they heard a crash and then a growl above them. “He’s inside!” Martha cried out.

“We haven’t got much time!” the Doctor said, and they kept running, hoping to get to the reception room before Lazarus caught up with them.

“Okay, Doctor, I’ve changed my mind,” Rose shouted as they ran down the stairs. He looked up at her, and she grinned. “That tux is definitely bad luck.”
With a Whimper

Chapter Notes

This is the longest chapter so far, thanks to the long post-episode scene at the end. Just a bit of domestic fun!

Back at the reception, confused donors and partygoers milled around in the dark with half-filled glasses of champagne in their hands. Across the room, the Doctor spotted the closed doors.

*Security protocols.* He rubbed his hand over his face. “Tish, is there another way out of here?”

She pointed to the opposite corner. “There’s an exit in the corner, but it’ll be locked now.”

He looked at Rose, who was already reaching into her handbag for her sonic screwdriver. “I’m on it,” she assured him, motioning for Martha and Tish to follow her.

While they ran to the exit, the Doctor leapt up onto the dais in front of the transformation chamber. “Listen to me! You people are in serious danger! You need to get out of here right now!”

A blonde woman in a gold dress scoffed at him. “Don’t be ridiculous. The biggest danger here is choking on an olive.”

Breaking glass heralded Lazarus’ arrival, and everyone looked up at the mezzanine in time to see him jump down onto a table. There was a moment of stunned silence, then the tableau broke and the party erupted into chaos.

The Doctor’s mind raced, trying to come up with the best way to keep Lazarus occupied, keep the attendees safe, and contain the situation. When the crowd of people suddenly formed a line flowing through the door, he checked the second item off the list.

Except not everyone was out yet. Lazarus loomed over the woman who’d just moments ago declared the party to be completely safe. She was staring up at him, frozen in terror, and he took advantage of her paralysis, swooping down on her with his mouth opened wide.

“No! Get away from her!” the Doctor yelled, but it was too late. Her desiccated corpse collapsed onto the ground.

The mutant stomped across the room and hulked over two humans huddled up on the floor. The Doctor groaned when he recognised Martha’s mother and brother.

“Lazarus! Leave them alone.” Lazarus turned towards him, and out of the corner of his eye, the Doctor saw Martha rush back into the room to help her family. “What’s the point? You can’t control it.” Lazarus’ attention was firmly focused on the Doctor now, and he purposely riled him up, wanting him to follow when he ran. “The mutation’s too strong. Killing those people won’t help you. You’re a fool. A vain old man who thought he could defy nature. Only Nature got her own back, didn’t she? You’re a joke, Lazarus!” Lazarus reared up, and the Doctor spat one last taunt before running. “A footnote in the history of failure!”

oOoOoOoOo
From the door, Martha watched in horror as her brother was knocked to the ground. She looked at him, then at Rose. “Stay with your family,” her friend told her. “I’ll get everyone else down into the foyer.”

Martha gave her a grateful smile, then jogged over to where her mum was supporting Leo, followed soon by Tish.

“What’s the Doctor doing?” Tish asked.

“He’s trying to buy us some time. Let’s not waste it.” Martha’s medical training came to the fore, and she tilted her brother’s head back. “Leo, look at me. Focus on me. Let’s see your eyes.” Leo’s pupils were unevenly dilated, as she’d expected. “He’s got a concussion. Mum, you’ll need to help him downstairs.”

She grabbed ice from a champagne bucket and wrapped it in a napkin and showed her mum how to keep it pressed to the bump on Leo’s head. “This’ll keep the swelling down. Go! I’ll be right behind you.” Her mum helped Leo out of the room, but Tish was still staring in the direction Lazarus and the Doctor had gone. “Tish, move! We need to get out of here.”

Halfway down the stairs, a new problem appeared. They’d managed to get out of the room, but the doors to the building were still sealed, and the panicking crowd was pounding against them. From her vantage point, she could see the danger to the people at the front of the crush as more people poured down the stairs and pressed forward.

“We can’t get out,” Tish said, seeing the same thing. “We’re trapped!”

Martha was still analysing the situation when she heard the faint buzz of the sonic over the sounds of the crowd. The lights came back on and the doors unlocked, letting the crowd spill out of the building.

To the right of the door, Rose vaulted lightly over a desk as the crowd thinned out. “There’s always an override switch by the security station,” she said, a wide grin on her face. “And now that everyone’s out, I’m gonna go help the Doctor.”

Martha watched her take the stairs two at a time, then took a deep breath and faced her family, already anticipating their reaction to her plan. “I’m going back,” she said, and she was proud of how firm her voice was.

Her mum turned around, her mouth hanging open. “You can’t! You saw what that thing did. It’ll kill you.”

Martha didn’t tell them that in the last week, she’d faced death half a dozen times. She didn’t tell them that running from danger had become a daily activity. She just straightened her shoulders and shook her head.

“I don’t care. I have to go.”

Francine held her hands out to her. “Martha, I know you want to help, but his wife is there. They can handle this—it’s their job.”

“He was buying us time, Martha,” Tish added. “Time for you to get out, too.”

“I’m not leaving them.” She looked at her mum. “This is the right thing to do.” Grudging pride crossed her face, and Martha turned and ran back up the stairs.
Rose was waiting for her at the door to the reception room, leaning against the wall with her arms crossed over her chest. “I figured you’d come,” she said. “Now, where do you think the Doctor is?”

An explosion sounded distantly from the second floor, and both women chuckled wryly. “That answers that question,” Rose said as they raced up the stairs.

The Doctor ran from the reception room with Lazarus on his tail. He wasn’t sure yet how he was going to neutralise the mutant, but the first priority was to keep him away from the crowd long enough for Rose and Martha to get everyone out of the building.

At the stairs, he made a split second decision and went down instead of up. The basement of a building like this should have plenty of places to lead the creature on a long chase, plenty of turns too tight for him to make easily.

They ducked through corridors, and then finally, the Doctor spotted the sign he’d been looking for: the boiler room. He dove through the door and climbed a ladder up onto a catwalk, then started creeping through the pipes, trying to stay out of sight.

“It’s no good, Doctor,” Lazarus said in a raspy voice. “You can’t stop me.”

The Doctor looked in the direction the voice came from. “Is that the same arrogance you had when you swore nothing had gone wrong with your device?”

“The arrogance is yours. You can’t stand in the way of progress.”

His s’s were turning sibilant, and the Doctor wondered how much humanity remained. “You call feeding on innocent people progress? You’re delusional!”

Pipes clanged against each other as Lazarus tried to fit into a space slightly too narrow for his new and improved body. “It is a necessary sacrifice.”

That argument, that life mattered less than scientific progress, had always angered the Doctor. It was the main ideological difference that had set him against the Rani after her exile from Gallifrey. “That’s not your decision to make.”

The Doctor crept a few more feet into the room, and then the lights turned on. *Good job, Rose,* he told her, then realised he’d just lost his only advantage. He heard an odd crackling and looked up.

“Oh, hello,” the Doctor said, then ran for the door. Out in the corridor, he raced for the stairs, taking them as fast as he could to get to the level the labs were on. Lazarus fell a little behind, which gave him time to put his plan into motion.

He darted into a lab and grinned when he saw all the tables. A chemistry lab; excellent. He jumped up on a table and pulled the globe off a light, revealing the fitting. A few quick twists, and the fuses were exposed.

That done, he dropped to the floor and turned on a Bunsen burner, snuffing out the flame. He managed to pull the tube off the gas nozzle on the table behind him before he heard Lazarus burst through the door.

The Doctor crawled through the lab, turning on as many gas spigots as possible while Lazarus
stalked him.

“More hide and seek, Doctor? How disappointing. Why don’t you come out and face me?”

“Have you looked in the mirror lately?” The Doctor sucked in a breath and stood up. “Why would I want to face that, hmm?”

Lazarus lunged at him, but the Doctor was ready; he ran towards the back door of the lab, hitting the light switches with his elbow on the way out the door. The lights he’d undone shorted out, and the spark ignited the gas that had flooded the room.

He was only a few feet from the door when the explosion blew it off its hinges, knocking him to the ground. Aware that there wasn’t much time, he jumped up, dusted himself off, and ran for the stairs.

The last thing he expected was to catch Rose by the waist as he turned a corner. “What are you doing here?” he demanded, his eyes darting from her to Martha.

Rose raised her eyebrows, but he didn’t bother apologising for his tone. The whole point of his diversion was to allow everyone—including Rose and Martha—to get to safety. And yet here they were, diving right back into danger.

“We heard the explosion, figured it was probably you,” Rose told him.

“I blasted Lazarus.”

“Did you kill him?” asked Martha.

Behind her, Lazarus leapt across the atrium from one corridor to another.

“More sort of annoyed him, I’d say,” the Doctor said, and they all ran for the stairs.

Back in the reception room, Rose spun around, looking for something to use against Lazarus. “What now? We’ve just gone round in a circle.”

The Doctor didn’t look at her, and she realised he was more upset than she’d anticipated. “We can’t lead him outside.” He leapt across the dais and opened the door to the genetic manipulation chamber. “Come on, get in.”

The three of them climbed into the decidedly not bigger-on-the-inside chamber as Lazarus entered the room. Rose was sandwiched between the Doctor and Martha, and the sounds of three people breathing heavily echoed in the chamber.

“Are we hiding?” asked Martha.

“No, he knows we’re here,” the Doctor said quietly. “But this is his masterpiece. I’m betting he won’t destroy it, not even to get at us.”

“But we’re trapped,” she pointed out.

He looked around the chamber, somehow managing to avoid looking Rose in the eye, even though they were standing face to face. “Well, yeah, that’s a slight problem.”

“So, what’s the plan, Doctor?” Rose asked, forcing him to acknowledge her.

She recognised the little furrow between his eyebrows that meant he was irritated. “Well, the plan was to get inside here.”
When he didn’t continue, Martha prompted him. “Then what?”

“Well, then I’d come up with another plan,” the Doctor said.

Rose felt Martha’s ribcage expand as she sucked in a panicked breath, but she couldn’t help but laugh. The Doctor’s eyes flicked down to hers, and oh yes, that was definitely annoyance.

*It’s deja vu, isn’t it? Us, trapped someplace with a monster trying to get in.* She took his hand. *I’m so glad I met you.*

Some of his anger faded, and she smiled up at him. “I think you’ll want this,” she offered, pulling her sonic out of her handbag. “I don’t think you could get to yours with all of us squeezed in here.”

The Doctor kissed her forehead. “Thanks.”

“What’re you going to do with that?” Martha asked, spotting it over Rose’s shoulder.

He started to slither down to the floor, and Rose was suddenly glad she’d been in the middle of this arrangement and not Martha. “Improvise.” A moment later, they heard the buzz of the sonic as he opened the panel in the floor.

Through the translucent glass, they could see the mutant’s shadow as he circled the chamber, trying to find a way in. “I still don’t understand where that thing came from,” Martha said. “Is it alien?”

The Doctor’s voice was muffled when he spoke. “No, for once it’s strictly human in origin.”

“That thing is not human,” Rose said vehemently.

He glanced up at her. “You know how easy it is to manipulate human DNA, given enough power. The energy field in this thing must have reactivated some dormant genes in his DNA, and now they’re becoming dominant.”

“So it’s a throwback,” Martha said.

Rose looked down at him as the Doctor pulled the wires out and started splicing them together, rambling about genetic mutations the whole time.

“Some option that evolution rejected for you millions of years ago, but the potential is still there. Locked away in your genes, forgotten about until Lazarus unlocked it by mistake.”

Martha sucked in a breath. “It’s like Pandora’s box.”

“Exactly.”

Rose shifted her weight from one foot to the other. The Doctor shot her a glance before going back to his wiring project. *Very sexy footwear, Rose.*

She shivered when he purposely let his fingers brush against her ankle. *Well, they had to match the dress.*

*They certainly do.*

A loud electronic hum interrupted their flirting, and the interior of the chamber was flooded with blue light.

“Doctor, what’s happening?” Martha asked.
At the same time, Rose said, “Did he just do what I think he did?”

The Doctor grunted. “If you think he turned the machine on, then yeah. He did.”

Martha’s voice shook. “And that’s not good, is it?”

The hum got louder and the chamber began to vibrate. “Well, I was hoping it was going to take him a little bit longer to work that out,” he muttered.

“Are you about done down there, Doctor?” Rose asked, just managing to keep her own voice calm.

She felt his fringe brush against her skirt when he nodded. “Nearly done.”

“Well, what’re you doing?” Martha yelled.

Rose glanced down and watched the Doctor hook wires back up inside the electrical panel. “I’m trying to set the capsule to reflect energy rather than receive it.”

“Will that kill it?” Martha asked.

“When he transforms, he’s three times his size. Cellular triplication. So he’s spreading himself thin.”

A flash of blinding white light filled the chamber, and Martha screamed. “We’re going to end up like him!”

“Just one more!”

The capsule stilled and the Doctor got back to his feet. “I think it’s safe out there now, ladies,” he said and pushed the door open. Rose followed him out into the open room, and he handed her sonic back to her. “Thank you for that.”

Martha stepped out slowly, her hand on her stomach. “I thought we were going to go through the blender then.”

The Doctor looked back at the chamber. “Really shouldn’t take that long just to reverse the polarity. I must be a bit out of practice.”

A naked man lay on the floor only a few yards away, and they approached him slowly. “Oh, God,” Martha murmured. “He seems so human again. It’s kind of pitiful.”

The Doctor nodded. “Eliot saw that, too. This is the way the world ends. Not with a bang, but with a whimper.”

When Martha called for paramedics, she discovered that emergency vehicles were already on the scene. “If the building is clear, ma’am,” the dispatcher said, “we can send them in immediately.”

“Yeah… yes, it’s clear.”

The dispatcher ended the call, and Martha looked at the Doctor and Rose. “They’re already here,” she said.

A moment later, the door opened and two paramedics wheeled a stretcher in. They expertly lifted the body up onto it, then covered him with a red cloth.
Martha, Rose, and the Doctor followed them out of the building. Martha didn’t want to admit it, but the sight of that body had shaken her more than anything she’d seen so far.

Tish’s voice pulled her out of her daze, and she turned to accept her sister’s hug. Over her shoulder, she spotted her mother, her face drawn tight with lips pressed into a thin line. Martha swallowed and let go of Tish after one more quick squeeze, moving to stand beside the Doctor and Rose as her mum slowly approached them.

“I don’t like this,” Francine said, enunciating each word. “I know you’re doing your job, doing what you do, and I admire that—but I do not approve of you dragging my daughter into it.”

“Mum, helping the Doctor and Rose tonight was my choice,” Martha protested. “They didn’t force me to come along.”

Her mum shook her head. “He may work for UNIT, but he does the most dangerous work. I’ve been told things.”

Martha shook her head slowly. “What are you talking about?”

Her mum took her by the shoulders and looked at her imploringly. “Look around you. Nothing but death and destruction. That’s the kind of work he does.”

“The Doctor stops the death and destruction.” Martha brushed her mum’s hands off her shoulders. “Look at all the people still alive—that’s because of him.”

“And it was Tish who invited everyone to this thing in the first place,” Leo broke in. “I’d say technically, it’s her fault.”

A loud crash from the direction the ambulance had gone interrupted Martha’s reply. The Doctor and Rose stiffened and looked down the street, then started jogging towards it. Both of them cast a backward glance at Martha as they went, and she took a step to follow her friends.

A hand on her arm stopped her. “Leave them,” her mum pleaded.

Martha shook her head slowly, then turned to run after Rose and the Doctor. The instincts she’d been honing through her adventures with them told her that crash had something to do with Lazarus, and if it did, then they needed to stop him.

She found them staring at the open doors of the ambulance. As she got closer, she saw two more shrivelled corpses, these wearing the standard yellow jackets of paramedics.

“Lazarus, back from the dead,” the Doctor muttered. “Should have known, really.” He pulled the sonic out and started scanning the area.

Tish ran up to them, and Martha smiled proudly at her sister before focusing on Lazarus. “Where’s he gone?”

The Doctor tilted his head towards the church. “That way. The church.”

“Cathedral,” Tish corrected as they stared at the bell tower. “It’s Southwark Cathedral. He told me.”

The Doctor led the way silently through the open doors of the cathedral, holding the sonic in front of him.

“Do you think he’s in here?” Rose whispered from his side.
The Doctor nodded. “Where would you go if you were looking for sanctuary?”

They walked down the long nave filled with wooden seats ready for parishioners. Behind an altar covered with a red and gold brocade cloth, they found Lazarus, shivering on the stone floor and wrapped in the red blanket that had covered his dead body.

Lazarus looked up at them. “I came here before, a lifetime ago. I thought I was going to die then. In fact, I was sure of it. I sat here, just a child, the sound of planes and bombs outside.”

The Doctor had been slowly moving across the sanctuary until he stood directly opposite Lazarus. “The Blitz.”

Lazarus grimaced. “You’ve read about it.”

The Doctor’s eyes flicked over to Rose. “We were there.”

Lazarus huffed out a breath. “You’re too young.”

“So are you,” the Doctor said, and something about the way he said it made Martha wonder how old he was.

Lazarus laughed, but then his spine cracked again and he gasped in pain. The Doctor circled him, looking at Lazarus, then up at the bell tower that was directly above them.

“In the morning, the fires had died,” Lazarus continued when he could speak again, “and I was still alive. I swore I’d never face death like that again. So defenceless. I would arm myself, fight back, defeat it.”

Rose watched the Doctor as he moved around Lazarus and stared up at the bell tower. Do you have an idea?

I might, but first I have to give him a chance.

“That’s what you were trying to do today?” the Doctor asked, trying to understand.

“That’s what I did today,” Lazarus countered hotly.

The Doctor’s anger swelled. “What about the other people who died?”

“They were nothing,” Lazarus said coldly. “I changed the course of history.”

“Any of them might have done too,” the Doctor retorted. “You think history’s only made with equations? Facing death is part of being human. You can’t change that.”

Lazarus snarled. “No, Doctor. Avoiding death, that’s being human. It’s our strongest impulse, to cling to life with every fibre of being. I’m only doing what everyone before me has tried to do. I’ve simply been more successful.” He cried out then as another spasm wracked his body.

“Look at yourself,” the Doctor demanded. “You’re mutating! You’ve no control over it. You call that a success?”

“I call it progress.” Lazarus declared, then hunched over in pain. “I’m more now than I was. More than just an ordinary human.”

“There’s no such thing as an ordinary human.”
Rose looked at the man convulsing on the floor in front of her. *He’s going to change again any minute.*

*I know,* the Doctor agreed. *If I can get him up into the bell tower somehow, I’ve an idea that might work.*

*Up there?* Rose looked up at the bell tower, then back at Lazarus, a plan forming in her mind.

“You’re so sentimental, Doctor,” Lazarus whispered. “Maybe you are older than you look.”

“I’m old enough to know that a longer life isn’t always a better one. Because unless you’re very lucky—” The Doctor’s gaze flicked over to Rose—“you will end up losing everyone that matters to you. And you won’t be that lucky. You will watch everything turn to dust.” He squatted down beside Lazarus. “If you live long enough, Lazarus, the only certainty left is that you’ll end up alone.”

“That’s a price worth paying,” Lazarus insisted mutinously.

“Is it?”

Lazarus writhed again, and Rose sidled over to Martha. “The Doctor says he needs Lazarus to go up into the bell tower. I’m gonna lure him away from here.”

Martha looked at her like she was crazy, but she nodded. “Okay.”

Lazarus panted. “I will feed soon.”

“I’m not going to let that happen,” the Doctor told him quietly.

“You’ve not been able to stop me so far,” Lazarus challenged.

Rose saw her chance and took it. “You’re right, Lazarus—he is older than he looks. Why take him when you could have fresher meat?”

The Doctor looked up at her, comprehension and consternation warring in his expression. “Rose, no.”

Lazarus lunged at her, and Rose spun away from him, running towards the stairs leading up to the tower. She heard two other pairs of dress shoes click against the stone floor and glanced behind her at both Jones sisters.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Keeping you out of trouble!” Tish told her.

“Making sure you live long enough for your husband to yell at you for this,” Martha added.

*I’m taking him to the tower, Doctor.*

They paused when pained cries echoed up the stone staircase. “Did you hear that?” Tish whispered.

Rose took off through the gallery towards the bell tower while Martha explained. “He’s changed again. Keep moving. We’ve got to lead him up.”

“Rose!” the Doctor shouted.

Rose realised he needed to see her, and she looked down at him from the gallery. “Doctor!”
Even from where she was, Rose could see how rigidly his fists hung at his sides. “Take him to the top. The very top of the bell tower, do you hear me?!”

“Up to the top!” Rose agreed, then ran off. She could hear the mutant getting closer; they didn’t have much time.

They burst out onto the wooden catwalk that ran around the perimeter of the belfry. “There’s nowhere to go,” Tish said. “We’re trapped!”

“No,” Rose countered. “We’re bait. The Doctor said he had a plan, if we could get him up here, so I led him up here.”

Tish stared incredulously at her sister, but Martha smiled. “He knows what he’s doing. We have to trust him.”

“Ladies.” The mutant entered the bell tower and perched on top of the railing opposite them.

Rose looked at him and steeled her resolve. “Stay behind me,” she said, positioning herself in front of the sisters. “If he takes me, make a run for it. Head down the stairs. You should have enough time.”

“But—” Martha protested.

“Tish, make sure she runs, yeah?”

Lazarus climbed onto the railing and tried to jump across the gap under the bell, but he lost his footing and swung out with his tail to keep from falling to the ground. Rose ducked the blow easily.

Organ music echoed up the tower, and Rose grasped the Doctor’s plan. Hypersonic sound waves had created the monster, so maybe they could uncreate it too.

Lazarus’ tail lashed out at them again, this time breaking the railing in front of them. Rose dodged one way and Tish and Martha dove the other. She stood up again and looked at him, and he answered her silent challenge by swinging his tail once more, swiping at her face this time.

Rose ducked and missed the first hit, but didn’t anticipate the tail swinging back. He caught her against the right side of her face and sent her flying, nearly over the edge of the catwalk.

“Rose!” Martha yelled as Rose latched onto the base of the wooden walkway, holding on with all her strength.

Rose??

*Just take care of it, Doctor,* she told him as Lazarus kept swishing his tail at her, trying to knock her off.

“Hold on!” Tish shouted. “Get away from her!”

The music reverberated even more loudly in the tower, and Rose had to fight the natural urge to cover her ears with her hands. Tish and Martha were both cringing from the noise, and above her, the mutant started to shriek with pain.

*It’s working, Doctor!* Rose told him as she adjusted her grip.

He sent one last shrieking pulse of music up the tower, and Lazarus roared in pain and tumbled over the edge of the walkway. Far below them, Rose heard a dull thud as he hit the cathedral floor.
Her fingers slipped, and Rose gritted her teeth, determined to hold on. Just when she thought she was going to lose that battle, Martha and Tish each grabbed a hand.

“Rose?” the Doctor hollered.

The sisters pulled her to safety, and Rose took a few panting breaths. “I’m okay, Doctor.” She looked at her friends. “We’re all okay.”

She shook her fingers, trying to ease the throbbing from clenching onto the walkway. “I don’t suppose we could agree not to tell my husband the part where I was dangling over the edge of the bell tower?” she asked, even though she knew she wouldn’t keep it from him.

All three women laughed, and then Rose took one of their hands each in hers. “Thanks.”

Tish shook her head, still laughing. “It’s your Doctor you should be thanking.”

Rose grinned proudly. “I told you he had a plan.”

Martha rolled her eyes. “Some plan.”

“He cut it a bit fine there, didn’t he?” Tish asked.

Rose snorted. “Yeah, for a Time Lord, he does have a habit of nearly running out of it.”

Tish looked at her, some of the laughter disappearing as the initial shock of the events wore off. “Who is he?”

“He’s the Doctor,” she said simply, because that was really all the answer they needed. Then she winced when his panic sharpened. “And we need to go back down there so he can see I’m really all right,” she added, getting to her feet.

They ran down the stairs, and Rose met the Doctor in the transept. He caught her elbow and she let him pull her into his arms. She tilted her head back, but he skipped her lips for the moment, brushing feather-light kisses all over her face first. Then he pulled back for just a moment and caressed her face before sinking his fingers into her hair.

Rose leaned into him when he fit his lips over hers in a sensual kiss. When the hand on her waist moved up to trace patterns on exposed skin in the middle of her back, she shivered and licked at his bottom lip. Almost immediately, his tongue swept into her mouth.

She could practically taste his dual fear and anger in the passionate kiss, and Rose stroked the nape of his neck and tried to pass calm to him. He sighed against her lips and gentled the kiss, relaxing the hold he had on her waist and finally pulling back, pressing his forehead to hers.

After a few more moments, Rose pulled out of his embrace and took his hand instead. Tish and Martha stood off to the side, shifting their weight from one foot to the other, and she smiled at them sheepishly.

“I didn’t know you could play,” Martha said, changing the subject.

The Doctor shoved his hands into his pockets. “Oh, well, you know, if you hang around with Beethoven, you’re bound to pick a few things up.”

Martha nodded. “Especially about playing loud.”

“Sorry?” the Doctor said, and Rose groaned at the joke.
Tish stepped forward, her eyes on Martha. “So are you going again?” she asked.

Martha looked at them, then back at her older sister. “I’ve got to,” she said. “There’s so much out there, Tish; you can’t even begin to understand it.”

Rose smiled; that line sounded so familiar. “I promise we’ll do our best to bring her back to you in one piece,” she told Tish.

“I suppose that’s the best I can ask for,” Tish agreed. “I won’t tell Mum you said that, though.”

The sisters looked at each other for a long moment, then Martha surged forward and wrapped her arms around Tish. “I love you,” she whispered. “And I am so proud of you.”

The Doctor waited until they were in the car on the way back to Martha’s flat to ask the question that had been burning at the back of his mind. “So, what happened up there?” he asked casually as he wrapped his arm around Rose.

He didn’t miss the way Martha’s eyes met Rose’s in the rear view mirror. He also didn’t miss the conflicted feelings Rose was projecting over their bond. So I was right, he thought. Something did happen.

He waited, and after a moment, Rose validated his trust in her.

“Lazarus—the mutant—he kept swinging his tail around. We dodged him a couple times, but one time he broke the wooden railing.”

The Doctor stiffened, and Rose faltered in her storytelling. “Keep going,” he said mildly.

“He was gonna swing at someone, so I made sure Martha and Tish were safe, and then…”

“You let him swing at you,” the Doctor said flatly. He knew Rose could feel his building anger, but he didn’t care. How could she do something so reckless?

“Yeah, sorta.” Something in the way she said that alerted the Doctor to the fact that there was more to the story than that. “He missed me the first time,” Rose said, “but then he came back and hit me in the face.”

Concern momentarily overrode the anger surging through the Doctor. “Where did he hit you?” In the darkened cathedral, he hadn’t noticed any marks on her.

She turned her face so he could see the large red welt forming on her right cheek. The Doctor held her jaw gently so he could turn her cheek toward the light to get a better look at it. The skin around it was already turning black and blue, and Rose winced when he brushed his fingers over it.

“Hold still,” he murmured, pulling his sonic out of his pocket. He turned it to the setting that healed minor bruises and abrasions and waved it slowly over the injury. “Better?” he asked when most of the discolouration and swelling were gone.

“Yeah.”

“Good. So, what happened after that?”

Rose shifted in her seat, and the Doctor was suddenly aware that he hadn’t heard the worst of the story yet. He remembered then what she’d said about the broken railing, and he tensed. “What
happened after he hit you?”

“I think you know,” Rose muttered.

The Doctor opened his mouth to demand an answer, but Rose’s eyes flicked up to Martha, and he realised she didn’t want to continue this row in front of an audience. Well, that was fine. He could wait until they were in their room to tell her exactly what he thought about the disregard she’d shown for her wellbeing on this trip.

The Doctor didn’t say a word as he sent the TARDIS into the Vortex. Rose tamped down her own building anger as best as she could; at least one of them should remain calm.

“Well, I think I’m going to change into something comfy and watch a film,” Martha said. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

When Martha squeezed Rose’s hand as she said goodnight, she knew the tension between herself and the Doctor was obvious. She looked up at him quickly, and the muscle was twitching in his jaw.

“Good night, Martha. Thanks for your help tonight,” Rose said.

“Let’s get changed,” the Doctor suggested, pulling his bow tie off. “This suit is definitely bad luck.”

“Didn’t it seem like there were a lot of coincidences tonight?” Rose asked as they walked to their room, not ready for the inevitable argument. “Did you see how surprised Martha was when Tish said she was the head of the PR department?”

The Doctor pushed their door open and shrugged his tuxedo jacket off as he stepped inside. “Well, it’s not uncommon for siblings to underrate each other’s accomplishments—especially if they’ve had to fight for their parents’ attention.”

“It doesn’t seem odd to you that someone so young would have that much responsibility?” Rose asked as she took her earrings off.

He paused in the middle of unbuttoning his shirt. “I hadn’t thought of it like that.”

“And that the person in question just happens to be our companion’s sister?”

“Add to that the mysterious Mr. Saxon putting our names on the guest list so we could get in without difficulty. Okay, yes. Those are a lot of coincidences.”

An awkward silence hung over them, then Rose took a deep breath and turned to the Doctor. “Are we going to talk about how you’re angry with me for coming back inside to help you?” she asked.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and took his black Chucks off, throwing them into the corner of the room with more force than was strictly necessary. “You and Martha were supposed to stay safely outside.”

She snorted and took her own shoes off. “Even if we set aside the fact that you never actually said that, since when have either of us just waited patiently while the other was in danger?”

“And what’s your excuse for that stunt in the cathedral?” he asked, his voice biting.

“You said you needed to get Lazarus into the bell tower.”
“But I didn’t say I wanted you to act as bait!”

Rose took a deep breath and blew it out her nose. “Did you have another plan to get him up there?” she asked calmly.

The Doctor paced in front of their bed in his black trousers and unbuttoned dress shirt. “No,” he admitted finally, running his hand through his hair. “But I might have come up with something if you hadn’t decided—again—to put both yourself and Martha in danger.”

“Why do you keep going on about what Martha did?” Rose asked.

“You heard her in the theatre with the Daleks,” he said through gritted teeth. “‘If Rose is staying, then so am I.’ She looks to you for guidance on when it’s safe to follow or hang behind, and you led her straight into danger.”

Rose’s own anger boiled over. “Of all the arrogant… I can’t decide what’s worse;” she spat out, “that you’ve apparently decided I’m nothing more than a babysitter for our companion, or that you think she needs one. Martha is a grown woman, Doctor. She chose to come with us, fully aware of the life we lead.”

He looked away from her, and she shook her head. “And I’m supposed to be your partner,” she whispered, letting her hurt seep into her voice. “You promised you wouldn’t send me away again. Didn’t you mean it?”

His anger faded, and he ran his hands wearily over his face. “Yeah,” he said, his voice hoarse.

Rose walked towards him slowly until they were standing face to face, about three feet apart. “What’s this really about, Doctor?”

His hands dropped to his sides, and he sagged in defeat. “I just want to keep you safe.”

“We stick together as much as possible to keep each other safe, don’t we?” Rose watched his face, and when she thought he was softening, she reached for his hand. “And we don’t just stand aside watching when people are in trouble; we help.”

“I know,” he groaned, “but if you were hurt…”

“Says the man I’ve found unconscious three times this week,” Rose retorted. “Are you going to stop running into dangerous situations?”

He sighed. “No.”

“Then you can’t expect me to.”

“Expect, no,” he agreed. “Wish for…”

Rose chuckled wryly. “I know the feeling.”

The Doctor nodded, and she thought she’d finally made her point. He took her hand, and she went willingly into his arms, breathing in the comforting honey scent of his skin.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered in her ear.

Rose pressed a kiss to his collarbone. “You’re forgiven.” She rested her cheek against his chest, considering her next words. “Can I tell you a secret?” she asked.
“Of course,” he said.

“I always feel safest when I’m with you.” His surprise rippled across their bond, and Rose tightened her arms around his waist. “Always,” she repeated firmly.

“But… why? How?” he asked. “I don’t try to find trouble, but somehow it seems like almost every trip ends in danger. How could you possibly feel safe with me?”

Rose took a half step back so she could look him in the eye. “Because you’re brilliant. When we’re in those situations, I know that if we’re going to get out of it, it’ll probably be because you figured out the magic secret that’ll solve everything.”

“Only if you haven’t figured it out first,” the Doctor interjected. “You don’t give yourself enough credit, Rose—you’re brilliant too.”

“About time you noticed,” Rose said cheekily. “I’ve been saving your life since day one, and don’t you forget it.”

A small smile finally crept across his face. “How could I? A pink and yellow girl swings into my life on a chain, taking out the bad guys and sweeping me off my feet in one move. That’s not something I’ll ever forget.”

Rose undid the Doctor’s cufflinks and slid the shirt off his shoulders. “I also feel safe when I’m with you because… because you love me,” she said quietly. “I know you’ll always protect me if you can.” She tossed the shirt onto the bed, then pulled his vest over his head and threw that into the laundry. “Don’t you feel safe with me for the same reason?”

“Of course I do,” he said, his sincerity and conviction easing the little doubt she’d had.

Rose hung the Doctor’s shirt up in the wardrobe, then walked back to him and turned her back to him. He silently unzipped her dress, and that was soon hanging up as well.

“Then are you going to yell at me the next time I follow you into something dangerous?” Rose asked.

“No,” he promised.

She pushed herself up on her toes and brushed a kiss over his lips. “Good. Now, I think I deserve an extra apology, since you started a fight with me on my birthday.”

He rubbed at the back of his neck. “We could go someplace fun and relaxing tomorrow,” he offered. “Ice skating on the mineral lakes of Kur-ha, maybe?”

“That sounds like fun,” Rose agreed. “I was thinking of something a little more immediate, though.”

“Anything you want.”

“Take me to dinner.” She laughed when the Doctor blinked. “I told you hours ago that I was starving, and I haven’t had anything to eat since then. It’s my birthday. I want more than a quick sandwich from the galley.”

They were quiet as they finished changing into everyday clothes. “I have an idea for dinner,” the Doctor said. “Would you mind eating here, if I picked food up?”

“Calling for take-away?” Rose asked. The Doctor nodded, and she smiled. “That’s fine by me.”
“Meet me in the study in ten… no, fifteen minutes,” the Doctor said, then darted out of their room.

He called their order in from the console room, then set the coordinates for Glaurus, twenty minutes after they received his call. The food was waiting when he reached the restaurant, and he could smell the crab cakes through the take-away container.

“Will there be anything else, sir?” the server asked.

The Doctor shook his head, then said, “Wait. A bottle of Rigellian wine.”

Back in the TARDIS, he moved a package from his coat pocket to his jacket, then took the food to the galley where a tray was waiting with two place settings. He dished the meal up quickly and balanced the tray on one hand while holding the bottle of wine in the other.

The door to the study was ajar, allowing him to push it open with his foot. Rose smiled at him from her spot in the corner of the couch. “Can you take the wine, love?” he asked, handing it to her.

Rose took the bottle, then looked at the food as he set the tray down. “You went to Glaurus,” she guessed right off the bat.

“I did.” The Doctor took the bottle from her and opened it, pouring the deep red wine into the waiting glasses. “And I got your favourite wine. After all, even time travellers only get one birthday a year.”

Rose looked at him over the rim of her glass. “You know, this romantic streak you’ve got surprised me at first,” she told him. “But I think I’ve got it figured out. You really are so impressive, Doctor.”

“Finally, she admits it!” the Doctor said, shaking his head. Rose giggled, and he dropped the act. “It’s easy to understand, Rose,” he told her. “I love to do things that make you happy. Speaking of…” He reached into his pocket and pulled out the package.

“Another gift?” Rose asked when he handed it to her.

“Well, the necklace isn’t really something you can use every day,” the Doctor explained. “And… Sometimes I just see things and they remind me of you.”

Rose shook her head and smiled softly as she tore the wrapping open. “Doctor,” she breathed when she saw the set of alien pigments. “These are amazing!”

“There are some colours you can’t really get on Earth,” the Doctor said, pointing out a unique shade of turquoise that seemed to shimmer. “That comes from Ekbrilon. The sand and seaweed on the beaches is iridescent, and they turn it into a pigment.”

“That sounds beautiful,” Rose said. “Maybe we could go there sometime?”

“I’ll put it on the list.”

Rose took a bite of a crab cake and studied the Doctor. “I can’t believe this is just occurring to me,” she said after she swallowed. “When is your birthday, Doctor?”

He blinked a few times. “I’m not really sure,” he admitted. “Once you’ve had more than a hundred of them, the date starts to lose some of its significance.”

“As a birthday, maybe,” Rose agreed. “But I want to be able to surprise you the way you’ve done me today.” She gave him a wink and a smile. “Maybe I’ll just pick a day without telling you. You’ll
wake up, and it’ll be your birthday.”

The Doctor arched an eyebrow. “Well, that would be a different spin on the surprise party.”
Only a Phone Call Away

Chapter Notes

This is a shorter chapter with some important plot points. Heads up--some things are starting to change.

You can read about Rose finding and trying on the scarf here.

The Master stood in his office, watching the moon reflect off the Thames as the clock ticked over to midnight, bringing Election Day one day closer. His aides had briefed him constantly from Lazarus’ gala, and although he hadn’t expected the device to wake up dormant genes in the old man, the rest of the evening had gone exactly as he’d hoped.

The Doctor and Rose Tyler had attended with Martha Jones, and they’d made a less than stellar impression on the young woman’s mother. It was almost disappointing how easy it had been for his operatives to persuade Mrs. Jones that the Doctor was a danger to her daughter, although the malfunctioning science experiment had certainly helped his case.

All she had needed to hear was the absolute truth about some of the Doctor’s adventures. Of course, what most of his aides didn’t know and thus couldn’t tell Mrs. Jones was that all of those disasters took place over the course of 900 years of space travel. It seemed like a horribly long list if you thought the Doctor was only 35 or 40 at the oldest.

His phone rang, and the Master turned away from the sight of his future empire to answer it. “This is Saxon.”

“Dexter here, sir.”

The Master smiled; the blonde woman was his most ruthless aide. “Has Francine Jones agreed to bring Martha back to Earth before we introduce the Toclafane to the world?” He heard her hesitation, and stiffened. “Dexter?”

“We ran into an unexpected wrinkle in the plan tonight, sir. While Mrs. Jones is certainly unimpressed with the Doctor, it seems Rose Tyler managed to allay some of her concerns.”

His eyes narrowed to slits. Of course. He hadn’t written a contingency for Rose Tyler into his plan. Your interfering is causing me more problems than I expected, he thought darkly at the TARDIS, even though the ship couldn’t hear him from this distance.

“What do you mean, exactly?” he asked.

“Even when we told her about how the Doctor tends to recruit young women to join him in his dangerous lifestyle, Mrs. Jones only seemed concerned that Martha would find something to do besides medicine. The panic we expected was simply… non-existent.”

The Master paced the length of his office, feeling his plans fall apart around him. “But will she be persuaded to pressure her daughter into coming home for a visit?”

“I’m currently not confident in the outcome of this mission, sir.”
The Master’s hand tightened into a fist and he breathed shallowly through his nose.

“Well then,” he said after he’d calmed down a bit. “It seems like we need to find more leverage to convince her to do what we want.”

“What did you have in mind, Master?” Dexter asked, a little of the uneasiness seeping out of her voice at the promise of a new plan.

“I believe I will give young Letitia the day off tomorrow. After all, she went through quite the ordeal tonight at the gala. Assign an agent to her flat. If Mrs. Jones balks, bring Tish in and tell her mother that it would be in her family’s best interests to do as we say.”

“Yes sir,” Dexter said, a smile in her voice.

“Thank you, Dexter,” the Master said then ended the call.

A metallic pop over his head and a dull sense of wrongness alerted him to the arrival of one of his Toclafane. A smile crossed the Master’s face as he considered how the Doctor would react to the name he’d given the mutated humans.

“Is it ready?” the Toclafane asked.

A second pop signalled a second Toclafane entering the room. “Will the Master’s Doctor friend be with us when the paradox starts?”

The Master leaned back in his chair. “Oh yes, he’ll be there,” he said smoothly. “I have the one thing he will always come back for—his precious TARDIS.” He very briefly considered the possibility that the Doctor would choose to protect his bond mate rather than confront him, but he dismissed it almost immediately. The Doctor’s pathological need to help people would dictate his return to Earth, even if he hadn’t stolen the TARDIS.

The two Toclafane soared through the air over his head. “The paradox machine is humming. It sounds funny.”

“We don’t like it.”

The Master hid his discomfort at the reminder of the TARDIS’ sickly hum. That was a side effect to his plan that he had not anticipated. “You’ll like it well enough when we hit start and the machine allows you and all of your brothers and sisters to pop back into existence.”

They sped up, generating a buzzing hum of their own. “Yes, Master. When will we all be together again?”

The Master turned and looked back out at London. “In three days. Just three days from now.”

oOoOoOoOo

Martha was unsurprised the morning morning after the gala when the Doctor announced that it was time for a relaxing trip. “After all, we wouldn’t want you to think your mum might be right—death all around me, etc etc,” he’d told her as he set the coordinates. But Martha had seen the way he glanced over at Rose as he said it, and she had a feeling this was an apology trip.

Not that Rose seemed to be holding a grudge over their argument the night before. Martha observed her lounging on the jump seat, looking for some trace of stiffness or resentment, but all she could see was the same excited smile Rose always seemed to wear whenever they landed someplace new.
Martha returned the smile, happy that fights between the Doctor and Rose were apparently nothing like fights between her parents. “So, Doctor,” she said, leaning against a strut, “where are we going?”


“Sounds gorgeous.” Martha said. “Like something from a Christmas card.” She looked at Rose’s thick jumper, snow boots, and heavy winter coat. “Should I go change, though?” she asked, gesturing to her own mid-weight top and leather jacket.

The Doctor nodded. “If you didn’t bring winter clothes, you can find something in the wardrobe room.”

In her room, Martha layered one of her own jumpers over her shirt and pulled out her favourite hat and scarf. A quick stop in the wardrobe room turned up a coat, gloves, and boots.

When she returned to the console room, the Doctor and Rose were both bundled up in hats, scarves, and gloves. He looked relatively normal, but Rose…

Martha stared at the multi-coloured scarf that covered most of her friend’s face and then looped around her neck several times. “What is that?”

Above the line of the scarf, Rose’s cheeks lifted in a smile. She took one of the ends of the scarf and twirled it in the air. “It used to be the Doctor’s,” she said. “The TARDIS had it out, and it happens to be really warm.”

“Probably because you’re covered in five layers of fabric.” Martha looked at the Doctor. “You used to wear that?”

“Lifetimes ago,” he told her, drawing a giggle from his wife. “Although I have to say, I think Rose pulls it off better than I ever did.”

Martha shook her head slowly—sometimes, they really were alien. “Well, am I dressed warmly enough now?” she asked.

The Doctor nodded. “Yes, you look much better prepared for the bracing winds of Kur-ha,” he said. “The high mineral content in the lakes means the water doesn’t freeze solid enough for skating until the temperature reaches -10. Ready to go?”

Martha patted her pocket. “Yep. I’ve got my phone so I can take some pictures. Even if I can’t tell people where I’ve been, I want to start making some sort of record for my own purposes.”

“Oh! Your mobile.” Rose looked at the Doctor. “Don’t you think it’s time…?”

He nodded and pulled one of his gloves off with his teeth. “Before we go, can I take a look at your phone, Martha?” She raised an eyebrow, but handed it over. He sonicked it for a few seconds, then tossed it back to her. “Right, there we go. Universal roaming. Never have to worry about a signal again.”

She looked down at her phone, her jaw dropping slightly when the display read Universal Roaming, with a full signal. “No way. This is too mad. You’re telling me I can phone anyone, anywhere in space and time on my mobile?”

“As long as you know the area code.” The Doctor smiled as he put his glove back on. “Frequent flier’s privilege. Go on, try it.”
Martha looked down at the phone, then back up at the Doctor. “I can’t believe this,” she muttered as she hit a speed dial button.

Tish’s phone rang twice before she picked up. “I can’t really talk, Martha. You’ll never believe who hired me after last night—Harold Saxon! He gave me the day off, but I’m doing some research from home so I can hit the ground running.” There was a short pause. “Hang on, how are you even calling?” she asked, her voice low. “Aren’t you still…”

“Yeah, I’m still with the Doctor and Rose,” Martha confirmed. “The Doctor just upgraded my phone so I could call home, and I wanted to try it out. You go back to your research, and I’ll call later.”

“Okay. Have fun, and be safe!”

Martha ended the call and put her phone back in her pocket. “That’s… unbelievable.”

Rose grinned. “That’s life in the TARDIS for you. Did you call Tish?”

“Yeah. I figured she’d be home, since her job kinda disappeared yesterday. But she’s already got a new job, working for Harold Saxon.”

The Doctor and Rose exchanged a look. “Who is Harold Saxon?” the Doctor asked as they stepped out of the TARDIS. Rose’s comments the night before about the coincidences surrounding Martha and her family were gaining credence.

“You’re kidding me,” Martha said. “You seriously don’t know?”

“We’re not exactly in contemporary London on a regular basis,” Rose pointed out.

They crested a small hill that overlooked a frozen lake. The planet’s sun hung fairly low in the sky, indicating it was still morning, but there were already several people on the ice.

“Right. But…” Martha rubbed at her eyebrow, then nodded. “Well, unless things change drastically in the next forty-eight hours, relative to London, he’s the next Prime Minister.”

“It’s weird to think that there’s going to be an election,” Rose said. “I’ve been gone so long, I’m just not aware of what’s going on here anymore.” She tried to remember the last time she’d even thought about UK politics and realised it must have been when Harriet Jones was ousted.

“Benefit of TARDIS travel,” the Doctor said as he led them towards a hut on the side of the lake. “You can avoid dealing with all the messy planetary politics. As long as they don’t call you back to become Lord President, at least.”

Rose choked back a laugh. She’d learned to pick up on those moments when his seemingly casual statements were actually nuggets of information about his past, and this was one.

“All right, both of you,” she said, deciding they could talk more about Saxon later. “We are going ice skating, and then, Doctor, you will get us whatever resembles hot chocolate on this planet while we warm up.”

Five hundred yards behind them, the TARDIS hummed in relief as the timelines stabilised. She should have known Harold Saxon would tickle her Wolf’s curiosity, but investigating him now would cause a paradox even she couldn’t contain.
Before they could face the Master, they had to travel to the end of the universe and wake him up. She would have to be stolen—a ripple of the future discomfort ran through her—and only then could her Wolf and her Thief follow and set things right.

Feeling only the tiniest hint of guilt, the TARDIS touched their minds and carefully implanted the subtle suggestion to brush aside any further questions of Harold Saxon’s identity. As much as she would want them to rescue her—had wanted them to rescue her—this was the way things had to happen.
Here Comes the Sun

Chapter Notes

This was a fun episode to work with. In general, my approach to working Rose into a story is to have her either do something with the Doctor or Martha, or instead of one of them. So the Racnoss took her along with Donna, and Milo and Cheen took her instead of Martha.

But sometimes, having a third person is a real bonus. When Rose was able to fly the TARDIS while the Doctor rescued Donna from the cab driving Santa, for instance, or when she could stand off to the side and observe the locals when the witches killed Lynley.

Now, finally, she gets to do something entirely new.

Rose linked her arm with Martha’s the next morning as they walked down the ramp to the console room. “So, have we shown you that travelling through time and space isn’t all about finding trouble?” she asked as she took her place beside the Doctor.

The TARDIS shimmied wildly before Martha could answer, and they all grabbed onto the closest solid thing. The Doctor looked up at the monitor and winced. Rose peered over his shoulder and laughed quietly.

“What was that?” Martha asked breathlessly.

“Trouble,” Rose said, deadpan.

“Distress signal,” the Doctor elaborated. “Lock onto it, Rose. Might be a bit of turbulence,” he said, and on cue, they were knocked to the floor. “Sorry.” He jumped to his feet and pushed the door open, letting a wave of hot air into the TARDIS. “Come on, ladies. Let’s take a look.”

A vague sense of wrongness settled on Rose as she followed the Doctor and Martha out of the TARDIS, and she tried to pinpoint its source. It would have been easy to assume it was just the heat and steam that had hit her in the face, but there was something else…

“Oof, it’s like a sauna in here.” Martha quickly peeled off her sweater, leaving her in just jeans and a red sleeveless top. “Quite the temperature difference from yesterday.”

Rose shook her head and started to walk towards the Doctor, but with every step she took, the feeling that she was doing something wrong intensified. She turned back around and stared at the TARDIS while the Doctor rambled about venting systems.

What is it, Rose?

She looked over her shoulder at the Doctor, standing by the door. I just have a bad feeling that we’re leaving her behind when we’re gonna need her.

The Doctor looked at their trusty ship and for a moment, she could feel his hesitation. The call for help pulled at him though, and he shook his head and turned back to the door.
Rose looked at the TARDIS, then at her bond mate. He and Martha were already stepping through the door, and she followed slowly.

“Oi, you lot!” someone yelled, then someone else said, “Seal that door, now!” and the door slammed shut in her face.

*Doctor!* Rose called out.

She felt his panic and knew he was working on getting the door open again, but she finally knew what she was supposed to be doing.

*I’ll stay in the TARDIS. I’m supposed to be in the TARDIS, I think.*

She was inside their ship before he could argue. *I’m already here, and you know that room is getting too hot for me to walk through again. Maybe you’ll need access to the scanner or something, and I can help from here.*

-oOoOoOoOo-

The Doctor spun around when he heard the door clang shut. “What are you doing?” he demanded as he grabbed the handle and tried to pull the door open. “My wife is still in there!”

Before the stranger could answer, Rose reached out to calm him down. *I’ll stay in the TARDIS,* she told him. *I’m supposed to be in the TARDIS, I think.*

He tried to argue with her, but Rose wouldn’t let him. When she pointed out that the room was already unsafe to walk through, he let go of the handle and took a step back.

The Doctor ran his hand through his hair. Rose was safe in the TARDIS, but Rose wasn’t with him. He took a breath and reminded himself that he trusted both her and their ship. Having them together was far from a worst-case scenario.

Feeling a little calmer, he looked around at the new faces for the first time—two men and a woman, all looking overheated and frazzled.

“Who are you?” the woman asked. “What are you doing on my ship?”

“Are you police?” the younger of the two men asked.

The Doctor blinked. “Why would we be police?”

“We got your distress signal,” Martha said.

And the Doctor thought he’d figured out what the signal was for. “If this is a ship, why can’t I hear any engines?”

The captain’s shoulders stiffened and the lines around her mouth tightened. “It went dead four minutes ago.”

“So maybe we should stop chatting and get to engineering, *Captain,*” the older man said, almost insolently.

Before the captain could answer, the computer announced that secure closure was active. Another crew member came running towards them, with bulkhead doors closing automatically on her heels.

“What?” the captain asked.
“The ship’s gone mad,” the younger man said.

“Who activated secure closure?” the new arrival said as she burst through a door marked Area 30. “I nearly got locked into Area 27.” She stared at the Doctor. “Who are you?” she asked as the last door slammed shut.

Martha beat him to the introductions. “He’s the Doctor, I’m Martha. Hello,” she said, almost absently as she walked towards the porthole.

“Impact projection forty two minutes twenty seven seconds,” the computer warned them.

Impact projection sounded a bit more serious than an average distress signal. The captain looked at her crew, then at the Doctor. “We’ll get out of this. I promise.”

“Doctor.”

The Doctor ignored Martha, focusing on the captain. “Forty two minutes until what?”

“Doctor!” Martha shouted, and he finally joined her at the porthole. “Look.”

What he was seeing was impossible, but the captain confirmed it. “Forty two minutes until we crash into the sun.”

This was why Rose hadn’t wanted to leave the TARDIS. The Doctor ran back to the captain and grabbed her by the shoulders. “How many crew members on board?”

“Seven, including us.”

“We transport cargo across the galaxy,” the older man explained. “Everything’s automated. We just keep the ship space-worthy.”

“Call the others, I’ll get you out,” the Doctor called back to them as he darted to the door between them and the TARDIS.

He ignored the cries and exclamations from the crew and swung the door open. A blast of heat knocked him flat, and he watched in stunned silence as the female crew member grabbed a welder’s mask and closed the door again.

“But my ship’s in there!” he protested, even though he knew there was no way even he could survive that heat long enough to get to the TARDIS.

“In the vent chamber?” the younger man asked, his eyes darting between the door and the Doctor incredulously.

The Doctor jumped to his feet and turned on him. “It’s our lifeboat.”

“It’s lava,” the older, sullen man said flatly.

The stark declaration shook the Doctor, and he reached out for Rose. *Everything all right in there, love?*

*Just as it should be,* she reassured him. *Why?*

The Doctor quickly filled Rose in on the situation on board ship, including the fact that there was no way he could get to her. *You were right about leaving the TARDIS behind.*
Rose picked up on his guilt. *But you were right about wanting to help them.* She paused, then said, *Couldn’t I just move the TARDIS to the other side of the door?*

The Doctor shook his head and chuckled—yet again, Rose saw the obvious answer that he missed. He spun on his heel to look at the captain. “Captain, if I told you I had a way to get you and your crew to safety, would you be interested?”

She was shaking her head before he finished the sentence. “This is my ship,” she said, and he understood the feeling behind those words. “My husband and I picked her out together; we’ve lived here for ten years. I’m not leaving.”

“Captain, I understand. Believe me, I do. But you’ve got no engines and you’re falling into a sun. I think you’re running out of options.”

She pressed her lips into a thin line and tilted her head, considering him. “This lifeboat you were talking about,” she said after a moment, “will it still be available in say… twenty minutes?”

The Doctor nodded slowly. It was a compromise he could live with. “Can we have some names, if we’re going to be working together for the next twenty minutes?” he asked.

The younger man stepped forward, his hand out. “Sorry. Riley Vashti,” he said as the Doctor shook his hand. “The one grumbling behind you is Scannell, that’s Erina by the door, and our captain’s name is McDonnell.”

“Nice to meet you,” the Doctor said, bouncing on his toes. “So, we fix the engines, we steer the ship away from the sun. Simple.” He ran through the crowd in the direction of engineering. “Engineering down here, is it?”

*Hold tight, Rose,* he told her as he ran. *The captain wants to take a shot at repairing the ship first, but if we can’t, we’ll need you to come pick us up in twenty minutes. All right, Doctor, but don’t let them wait too long.*

The Doctor’s eyes widened when he entered the engine room. “Blimey, do you always leave things in such a mess?”

“Oh, my God,” McDonnell said.

“What the hell happened?” Scannell groaned when he saw the state of the engines.

“Oh, it’s wrecked,” Riley said, taking in the disarray of parts lying all over the floor. The engine had been almost completely dismantled, and not carefully. Several of the pieces were broken beyond repair, and unless they had replacements, fixing this engine wouldn’t be as simple as he’d hoped.

“Pretty efficiently too,” the Doctor agreed. “Someone knew what they were doing.”

McDonnell looked around the room. “Where’s Korwin? Has anyone heard from him or Ashton?”

“No.”

“You mean someone did this on purpose?” Martha asked.

The Doctor shook his head as he took in the extent of the damage. His eyebrows rose when he noted they used energy scoops for fusion. Filing that fact away, he made his way over to a computer terminal, putting his glasses on so he could read it more easily.
“Korwin, Ashton? Where are you?” the captain asked over the intercom. “Korwin, can you answer? Where the hell is he?” she demanded when she didn’t get an answer. “He should be up here.”

“Oh, we’re in the Torajii system,” the Doctor said when he managed to get into the computer system. “Lovely. You’re a long way from home, Martha,” he added. “Half a universe away.”

“Yeah. Feels it,” she said.

But their location made the energy scoops even more anomalous. “And you’re still using energy scoops for fusion?” he asked McDonnell. “Hasn’t that been outlawed yet?”

The captain shared a glance with Riley—who happened to be the one who’d asked if they were the police. “We’re due to upgrade next docking,” she said, and the lie was painfully transparent. “Scannell, engine report.”

Scannell moved to the same computer terminal the Doctor had just used and ran a diagnostic. “No response.”


Scannell jogged around to the other side of the engine and inspected it closer with a torch. “They’re burnt out. The controls are wrecked. I can’t get them back online.”

“Oh, come on.” The Doctor whipped his glasses off. “Auxiliary engines. Every craft’s got auxiliaries.”

“We don’t have access from here,” the captain said. “The auxiliary controls are in the front of the ship.”

“Yeah, with twenty nine password sealed doors between us and them,” Scannell proclaimed darkly. “You’ll never get there in time.”

“Can’t you override the doors?” Martha asked.

“No. Sealed closure means what it says,” Scannell said bluntly. “They’re all dead-lock sealed.”

The Doctor slid the sonic screwdriver back into his pocket. Well there goes that idea. “So a sonic screwdriver’s no use.”

Scannell scoffed at him. “Nothing’s any use. We’ve got no engines, no time, and no chance.”

The Doctor looked at McDonnell. “It might be a good time to call it a day, Captain. Say the word, and I’ll have my wife bring our ship here so we can evacuate you and your crew.”

She hesitated this time, but in the end, held her ground. “Nothing is going to happen to us in the seventeen minutes we have left,” she told him. “Let’s give repairing the engines a try.”

The Doctor sighed, but didn’t argue. “All right. And while we’re working on these engines, someone can try to get through the doors between here and the auxiliaries. Who’s got the door passwords?”

“They’re randomly generated,” Riley said. “Reckon I know most of them.”

“Then what’re you waiting for, Riley Vashti?” the Doctor asked, jerking his head towards the front of the ship. “Get on it.”
Riley turned around and pulled a heavy red backpack down from a shelf. “Well, it’s a two person job. One, to take this for the questions, and the other to carry this.”

He grabbed a clamp with a manual handle, and the Doctor recognised the system. The clamp would fit over the automatic door lock, and when the question was answered correctly, the computer would send a pulse to it, allowing the wheel to turn, opening the door.

Riley slung the backpack over one shoulder and looked at McDonnell. “The oldest and cheapest security system around, eh, Captain?”

“Reliable and simple, just like you, eh, Riley?”

Riley put the backpack containing the computer on, hefting it up on his shoulders. “Try and be helpful, get abuse. Nice.”

“I’ll help you.” Martha grabbed the clamp from him. “Make myself useful.”

“It’s remotely controlled by the computer panel,” Riley said. “That’s why it needs two.”

“Oi.” The Doctor rested a hand on her shoulder. “Be careful.”

“You too.” She smiled warmly, then followed Riley towards the first sealed door.

The Doctor watched her go, then took a moment to think about their situation. A ship falling into a sun because the engines had been sabotaged. A ship that quite obviously still used illegal energy scoops to get fuel for their fusion engines.

Rose, are you still interested in running some scans?

Tell me what you need and how to set them up.

He quickly ran her through the process to run a scan of the sun they were falling into. It should take ten minutes, maybe a little longer. Let me know as soon as the results come back.

Of course. He sensed Rose hesitating, and waited. Be careful.

I will.

During their brief telepathic conversation, McDonnell had gotten a call from the med centre. She ran out of engineering just as he ended the conversation with Rose, and everyone else in the room followed after her. They ran past Riley and Martha, who were getting ready to open the first door.

“Impact in thirty four thirty one,” the computer announced, and the Doctor tried to keep his brain from calculating the chances that they could get an engine—any engine—working in that time. If they hadn’t made substantial progress when the twenty minutes were up, he would insist that the captain evacuate. There wasn’t any point in going down with her ship when there was an escape available.

“Korwin!” McDonnell cried out as she burst into a brightly lit room, the Doctor on her heels. “What’s happened? Is he okay?”

The Doctor looked down at Korwin, who was thrashing around on the bed. Another man—presumably Ashton—was helping the crew physician restrain him so they could get him inside what looked like a dated MRI scanner. He ran to the doctor’s side to get a closer look at the patient.

“Kath, help me!” Korwin grunted, his eyes screwed shut. “It’s burning me!”
“How long’s he been like this?” the Doctor asked.

The doctor didn’t look away from her patient. “Ashton just brought him in,” she told him.

The Doctor scanned Korwin quickly with the sonic screwdriver, and the doctor looked at him, askance. “What are you doing?”

“Don’t get too close,” the Doctor told the crew, who were all crowding around their friend.

“Don’t be so stupid,” McDonnell spat out. “That’s my husband.”

“And he’s just sabotaged our ship,” Ashton retorted.

“What?” McDonnell asked.

“He went mad,” Ashton told her as he fought to hold Korwin’s shoulders down. “He put the ship onto secure closure, then he set the heat pulse to melt the controls.”

She shook her head. “No way. He wouldn’t do that.”

“I saw it happen, Captain.”

“Korwin?” The Doctor put a hand on the man’s shoulder. “Korwin, open your eyes for me a second.”

He thrashed around on the bed, his eyes screwed shut. “I can’t!”

His refusal tracked with the readings the Doctor had gotten from the sonic. Korwin’s brain activity was highly abnormal. Still, he gave it one last shot. There must be something about his eyes that held the answer to the mystery.

“Yeah, course you can,” the Doctor said. “Go on.”

Korwin’s thrashing became more violent. “Don’t make me look at you, please.”

The time for talking was over; Ashton and the doctor were struggling to hold Korwin still. The Doctor grabbed a hypo-gun off the instrument tray. “All right, all right, all right. Just relax.” He held the device up to the doctor. “Sedative?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

The Doctor pressed the spray to Korwin’s neck and sedated him. He convulsed one last time, then fell back limply on the bed.

“What’s wrong with him?” McDonnell asked.

“Rising body temperature, unusual energy readings,” the Doctor mused. He paused for a moment, then snapped his fingers when he finally realised what Korwin was sitting in front of. “Stasis chamber. I do love a good stasis chamber. Keep him sedated in there. Regulate the body temperature.”

The doctor turned around to a computer terminal and started punching in commands.

The Doctor stared at Korwin’s sedated body. “And, just for fun, run a bioscan and tissue profile on a metabolic detail.”
The doctor looked back at him over her shoulder, her brows drawn together in confusion. “Just doing them now.”

“Oh, you’re good,” the Doctor said. “Anyone else presenting these symptoms?”

“Not so far,” she told him.

“Well, that’s something.”

“Will someone tell me what is the matter with him?” McDonnell entreated.

“Some sort of infection. We’ll know more after the test results.” He leaned over the bed and looked her in the eye. “Now, allons-y, back downstairs,” he told her, pointing towards the door, but she didn’t move. “Hey.” She looked at Korwin, then back at the Doctor. “See about those engines. Go. Hey. Go,” he said, his voice a little softer at the end. With one last fearful glance at her husband, McDonnell left the med centre.

The Doctor stared down at Korwin for a moment longer, then jogged towards the door. “Call us if there’s news,” he told the doctor. “Any questions?”

“Yeah. Who are you?”

He paused at the door and grinned back at her. “I’m the Doctor. And you are?”

“Abi Lerner, ship’s physician.”

“Good luck, Doctor,” he told her, then ran back to engineering.

Seven minutes after Martha had left the engine room with Riley, they were still waiting at the first door. The computer continued its countdown—heat shields at twenty-five percent, impact in thirty-two fifty—and she looked over at Riley, who was keying something into the computer he’d brought with them.

“Hurry up, will you?”

“All right.” He continued typing, then looked at her and pointed at the door. “Fix the clamp on.”

As she did, she realised Riley had gone back to typing on the computer. “What are you typing?”

“Each door’s trip code is the answer to a random question set by the crew.” He shot her a grin. “Nine tours back, we got drunk, thought them up. Reckoning was, if we’re hijacked, we’re the only ones who know all the answers.”

Martha was starting to understand exactly how the system worked. “So you type in the right answer…”

Riley patted the top of the computer. “This sends an unlock pulse to the clamp. But we only get one chance per door. Get it wrong, the whole system freezes.”

Privately, Martha thought that sounded like a rubbish security system—what happened if the crew changed, or if one of them were injured? To Riley, she only said, “Better not get it wrong then.”

“Okay. Date of SS Pentallian’s first flight. That’s all right.” He pointed at Martha. “Go!”
She looked down at the clamp, and the lights turned green. “Yes!” she exclaimed as the door swung open.

“Twenty eight more to go!” Riley reminded her as they passed through it.

Running through the corridor, Martha remembered again that part of what she loved about travelling with Rose and the Doctor was the adrenaline rush. Here she was, racing against the clock to save a ship from falling into a sun. It was terrifying, but it was also fantastic.

The Doctor’s voice came over the intercom just as they reached door twenty-eight. “Martha? Riley? How’re you doing?”

“Area 29 at the door to 28,” she told him.

“Yeah, you’ve got to move faster.”

She pulled a face at his impatience. “We’re doing our best.”

Riley pulled up the next question while she slammed the clamp onto the door. “Find the next number in the sequence 313, 331, 367.” He stared blankly at the monitor. “What?”

His confusion threw Martha, and she looked at him over her shoulder. “You said the crew knew all the answers.”

He shrugged sheepishly. “The crew’s changed since we set the questions.”

“You’re joking.” Definitely rubbish.

The Doctor broke in over the intercom. “379.”

“What?” Martha asked, both a little surprised that the rest of the crew was apparently listening to everything they were saying, and confused by his answer.

“It’s a sequence of happy primes. 379.”

“Happy what?” Martha mumbled.

“Just enter it!” he ordered.

Martha and Riley exchanged a worried look, and Riley asked, “Are you sure? We only get one chance.”

“Any number that reduces to one when you take the sum of the square of its digits and you continue iterating until it yields one is a happy number. Any number that doesn’t, isn’t. A happy prime is a number that is both happy and prime. Now type it in!” he ordered. “I don’t know, talk about dumbing down! Don’t they teach recreational mathematics any more?” he muttered.

The door opened, and in Martha’s elation, she let his insult slide. “We’re through!”

“Keep moving, fast as you can,” the Doctor told her. “And, Martha, be careful. There may be something else on board this ship.”

“Any time you want to unnerve me, feel free.”

“Will do, thanks.”
Martha rolled her eyes at his blasé answer, then pushed aside the idea that there was something on board. According to the computer, two minutes had passed since they’d stood outside door 29, which meant they were moving at a rate of a door per minute. The Doctor might think they needed to move faster, but all things considered, that didn’t seem like too bad a pace.

The way they got through the doors, on the other hand… When they reached door 27, she stood with Riley while he pulled up the question. “I can’t believe our lives depend on some stupid pub quiz. Is that the next one?”

He wiped the sweat off his brow. “Oh, this is a nightmare. Classical music. Who had the most pre-download number ones, Elvis Presley or The Be-a-tles? How are we supposed to know that?”

“Doctor?” Martha asked.

“What is it now?” he snapped.

“Who had the most number ones, Elvis or the Beatles? That’s pre-download.”

“Elvis. No, the Beatles. No, wait.” There was a pause, and Martha had a feeling he was asking Rose.

“It’s Elvis,” he said a moment later, his voice confident.

“Thank you, Doctor. And thank Rose for us too,” she said, fancying she could detect his surprise over the intercom.

Riley looked at her as he typed it in. “Who’s Rose?”

“Rose is his wife—you know, the one he yelled at you to let out of the venting chamber, only you didn’t open the door in time?” He winced, and she felt bad. “Sorry. Just be glad it was simple enough for her to get back into our ship, or he would have shoved you out of the way and gone back in for her, no matter how dangerous it was.”

The door swung open and they packed up the gear to go on to the next one. “So if she’s on your ship, how come you’re thanking her?”

Martha hesitated; Rose hadn’t strictly told her not to tell anyone they were telepathic, but it wasn’t something they broadcasted either. “The Doctor and Rose have a personal communication device,” she said.

“That’s convenient,” Riley said as they jogged down the corridor.

“What.”

Rose tapped her fingers again the console, and the TARDIS zapped her lightly. I’m sorry, dear, she said, patting a strut affectionately. I just want to know what’s going on, and why it was so important for me to stay in here.

The moment she’d stepped back into the TARDIS, that sense of wrongness had disappeared. Something was happening here, something they could change, and she could do more from here than she could out on the ship with the Doctor.

At first, she’d thought her presence in the TARDIS would allow them to rescue the crew. She understood why the captain had asked for time to save her ship, but she wished they’d just agreed to
leave right away.

Rose had been grateful when the Doctor had asked her to set up the scan, both because it validated the need for her to be here, and because it gave her something to do. Watching spy movies with the Doctor, she’d always wondered if the person who stayed in the van got bored, waiting to be needed. Well, now she knew the answer.

*Rose, who had more number ones, pre-download: Elvis, or the Beatles?*

The question came out of the blue, but thanks to dating a wannabe rockstar, Rose knew the answer. *Elvis.*

*You’re sure?*

*Remember, the Beatles weren’t even available to download the last time I would have looked up Earth statistics.*

*Thank you.*

The TARDIS beeped, and Rose hopped off the jump seat. Pulling the monitor around, she frowned. There was something about the rhythm of the solar flares that seemed familiar…

*Can you pull up a saved scan on a similar sun and put them side by side?* she asked the ship. A moment later, she was looking at a split screen, and her jaw dropped. These readings were wildly different from what a sun should normally show. When compared to the arhythmic behaviour of a typical sun, she recognised the pattern that had struck her—it was like breaths, or heartbeats.

*Doctor!* She sensed that she immediately had his attention, and she continued. *These results…*

His focus shifted abruptly. Something was happening onboard ship that required his full concentration, and she paced the console room.

It only took a moment for him to come back to her. *What’s happening?* she asked.

*Something’s wrong in the med centre. The captain’s husband has been taken over by a parasite, and I think it’s causing him to threaten the doctor. Show me the results.*

Rose stared at the screen and then closed her eyes, focusing on sending the picture over their bond. The Doctor swore in Gallifreyan when he got it, and she winced.

*Is it what I think it is?*

*If you think that sun is alive, then yes. And I think I might know what’s causing everything on this ship, but—*

He pulled back from their connection so abruptly it gave Rose a mild headache. “Oh, I hate this,” she muttered, sitting on the jump seat and rubbing at her temple. “You’d better be careful out there.”

oOoOoOoOo

After passing the answer on to Martha, the Doctor turned back to the engine problem—they needed a backup in case Martha and Riley didn’t reach the auxiliary engines in time.

“Now, where was I?” he asked. “Here comes the sun. No, resources.” It struck him like lightning, and he pointed to the generator in the back of engineering. “So, the power’s still working, the generator’s going. If we can harness that. Ah!”
McDonnell’s eyes showed hope for the first time since he and Martha had arrived onboard. “Use the generator to jump-start the ship.”

“Exactly. At the very least, it’ll buy us some more time,” he said pointedly. They barely had ten minutes left before evacuation became necessary.

She nodded quickly. “That is brilliant.”

The Doctor grinned and looked around the room. “I know. See? Tiny glimmer of hope.”

“If it works,” Scannell said pessimistically.

McDonnell looked at him, her eyes hard. “Oh, believe me. You’re going to make it work.”

He glowered at her, but turned around to get to work. The Doctor looked back at McDonnell, a triumphant grin on his face. “That told him.”

The mood in engineering had just turned around when Abi called over the intercom. “Doctor, these readings are starting to scare me.”

“What do you mean?” the Doctor asked.

“Well, Korwin’s body’s changing. His whole biological make-up. It’s impossible.”

The Doctor rubbed at his forehead. This was the news he’d been fearing ever since he’d read the scans on the sonic. The readings had matched those of someone who was being taken over by an aggressive parasite. That’s why he’d wanted him sedated and kept in the stasis chamber—to keep the parasite from spreading.

Doctor! He turned inward and focused on Rose. These results…

“This is med centre,” Abi said, and when he heard the panic in her voice, he turned all his attention towards her. “Urgent assistance requested. Urgent assistance!”

Her voice was high and shaky, and the Doctor raced out of the room with McDonnell on his heels. “Stay here! Keep working!” he ordered as he ran by Scannell.

“Korwin, what’s happened to you?” Abi asked.

A hoarse voice came over the intercom. “Burn with me.”

What’s happening? Rose asked.

Something’s wrong in the med centre. The captain’s husband has been taken over by a parasite, and I think it’s causing him to threaten the doctor. Show me the results.

A moment later, she sent him a picture of the scan results. He saw the truth immediately and swore silently in Gallifreyan. So that’s what had infected Korwin.

Is it what I think it is? Rose asked.

This was even worse than the Doctor had anticipated. A living sun wasn’t something he’d ever encountered before. If you think that sun is alive, then yes. And I think I might know what’s causing everything on this ship, but—

“Captain?” Scannell said.
The Doctor wheeled around after turning a corner, cutting off his conversation with Rose as he turned. “I told you to stay in engineering.”

“I only take orders from one person round here,” he said flatly.

“Oh, is he always this cheery?” the Doctor groused, put out that Scannell hadn’t done what he said. The eerie conversation in the med centre was still being broadcast over the comms.

“Burn with me,” Korwin repeated.

“Korwin, you’re sick,” Abi pleaded.

“Burn. With. Me.”

They hadn’t yet reached the med centre when Abi’s screams pierced the air over the intercom. McDonnell froze for an instant, horror and disbelief on her face, and then she started running again.

“Doctor, what were those screams?” Martha asked.

The Doctor ran up the stairs. “Concentrate on those doors. You’ve got to keep moving forward.”

The med centre was empty when they finally reached it. “Korwin’s gone,” McDonnell said, staring at the empty stasis chamber.

“Oh, my God.”

The Doctor turned and followed Scannell’s gaze, his hearts dropping when he saw what had drawn that reaction from the man. Burned into the radiation shield was a silhouette of a woman, cringing in fear.

“Tell me that’s not Lerner,” Scannell pleaded, the first time he’d shown an emotion besides resentment since they’d arrived.

The Doctor touched the pattern and realised it wasn’t a silhouette at all—it was burn residue. “Endothermic vaporisation. I’ve never seen one this ferocious.” It clicked then, Korwin’s words and the living sun. “Burn with me.”

“That’s what we heard Korwin say,” Scannell said.

The words startled McDonnell out of her horrified daze. “What? Do you think…?” She stepped forward, shaking her head. “No way. Scannell, tell him. Korwin is not a killer. He can’t vaporise people. He’s human!”

The Doctor picked up the test results that had concerned Abi. “His bioscan results. Internal temperature, one hundred degrees! Body oxygen replaced by hydrogen. Your husband hasn’t been infected; he’s been overwhelmed.”

McDonnell snatched it out of his hand. “The test results are wrong.”

For the Doctor, the pieces had all fallen into place. He crossed his arms and stared at the captain. “You use an energy scoop. Did you refuel from that sun?”

She was silent, but the way her eyes wouldn’t meet his told him the truth.

He shoved his hands through his hair. “You should have scanned for life!”
“I don’t understand,” McDonnell said, blinking up at him.

“That sun is alive. A living organism. You scooped out its heart, used it for fuel, and now it’s screaming!”

McDonnell shook her head. “What do you mean? How can a sun be alive? Why are you saying that?

“Because it’s living in Korwin,” he said bluntly. “I told you he’d been infected, taken over by another organism. It’s the sun, the sun you wounded that’s now trying to take back its own.”

“How can you possibly know that?” Scannell demanded. “You can’t know that.”

The Doctor glared at the engineer who’d been nothing but a pain in the arse from the moment they’d met. “One, I’m very clever. Two, my wife, who is also very clever, scanned the sun from our ship and sent me the results.” He waved his sonic screwdriver at them, fudging the truth slightly. “Three, didn’t I mention the oxygen in Korwin’s body had been replaced by hydrogen? Which happens to be one of the key elements in a star?”

“Oh, my God.” McDonnell leaned against the wall, staring blankly into space. “This is all my fault. I did this—I brought this thing onto our ship and now it’s in Korwin.”

“You should have scanned,” the Doctor told her quietly.

McDonnell turned around, her face in her hands. Scannell looked at her, then back at the Doctor.

“Doctor, if you give her a minute.” He put a comforting hand on her elbow, but she shook her head and spun away from him.

“I’m fine. I need to warn the crew.” She took a deep breath, then walked to the comms station and pressed the button. “Everybody, listen to me. Something has infected Korwin. We think…” She paused, and her pain-filled eyes met the Doctor’s. “He killed Abi Lerner,” she finished. “None of you must go anywhere near him, is that clear?”

McDonnell took her finger off the comms button and pressed her forehead to the wall, gathering her strength. After a moment, she sat down on the steps and looked up at the Doctor.

“Is the infection permanent?” she asked. “Can you cure him?”

The Doctor could see the desperate longing in her eyes, so he lied. “I don’t know.”

She sucked in a breath, seeing through the Doctor’s bad poker face. “Don’t lie to me, Doctor. Eleven years we’ve been married. We chose this ship together. He keeps me honest, so I don’t want false hope,” she said emphatically.

The Doctor clenched his jaw. “The parasite’s too aggressive. Your husband’s gone. There’s no way back. I’m sorry.”

McDonnell nodded a few times. “Thank you,” she said, then pressed her lips together to keep from crying.

He sighed and sat down on the bed. “The thing is, knowing what’s infected Korwin, knowing what’s going on, that doesn’t change our current situation at all. We need to dump the fuel, obviously, but I’m guessing the controls to do that are in the front of the ship?”

The captain nodded. “But we can tell Riley now, so he does it as soon as he gets there,” she pointed
“True, we can.” He paused. “Although it might be time to admit defeat,” he suggested. “There’s only four minutes left in your twenty, and Rose could have the TARDIS here in less than a minute.” Her hands clenched into fists, and the Doctor pressed his advantage. “You need to think of the safety of your remaining crew. That sun is angry. He will be looking for…” McDonnell flinched, and he let the sentence trail off.

There was a tense silence in the med centre, then McDonnell let out a long breath. “You’re right, Doctor.”

The announcement that Korwin was infected and a crew member was dead lit a fire under Martha and Riley. They blazed through the next five doors, then Martha chanced contacting the Doctor on the comms.

“Doctor, we’re through to Area 16.”

“Change of plans,” he told her. “We’re evacuating the ship. Come back to Area 30; Rose will have the TARDIS there by the time you arrive.”

Martha couldn’t help the loud sigh of relief that whooshed out of her lungs. “Best news I’ve heard all day,” she said honestly.

Riley put the computer back in the backpack and zipped it shut. “Well, we had a good run at least, didn’t we?” he asked as he shouldered the bag.

The door behind them opened, cutting off Martha’s response. Steam billowed into Area 17, and she strained to see who was coming through.

“Who’s there?” Riley asked.

Martha couldn’t make out the face of the hazy figure that appeared in the steam, and she didn’t know the crew well enough to know who was who without seeing their features.

“Is that Korwin?” she asked nervously.

“No, wait a minute,” Riley said, taking a few steps towards the door.

The figure stepped into the room, wearing a welding helmet over his face.

Riley’s shoulders raised in a sigh of relief. “Oh, Ashton, what’re you doing?”

“Burn with me,” Ashton said.

Martha froze. That was what Korwin had said in the med centre; they’d all heard it. She started looking around the room frantically for a way out while Riley kept talking to his friend, unaware of the truth.

“Well, if you want to help—”

“Burn with me. Burn with me.” Ashton raised his hand to the visor.

Martha smacked the control she’d spotted. “Move!” A door opened, and she slipped through it. “Come on!”
They were in a small room, empty except for a control panel and a hatch on the opposite wall. She leaned back against the wall, breathing heavily, but Ashton appeared in the door’s window, and she realised they weren’t safe quite yet.

Riley turned to the panel and quickly opened the hatch to the tiny chamber. Martha climbed in first, and Riley shut the door behind him.

Ashton turned his head to look at something on his right, and Riley shook his head in disbelief.
“What is happening on this ship?”

“Never mind that, where are we?” Martha asked.

“Airlock sealed. Jettison escape pod.”

Martha looked at Riley. “That doesn’t mean us?” The look on his face told her all she needed to know.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 24: If You Can’t Stand the Heat…

Martha stared through two windows at the man trying to send her out into space while Riley worked frantically at the control panel in the escape pod.

“Doctor!” she called out over the intercom. “We’re stuck in an escape pod off the Area 17 airlock. One of the crew’s trying to jettison us! You’ve got to help us! Tell me you can stop it.”

Riley kept tapping at the keypad, and finally they heard, “Jettison held.”

He slumped against the computer. “Thank you.”

But they barely had time to breathe a sigh of relief before the computer spoke again. “Jettison reactivated.”

Martha couldn’t help it—she screamed in fear. She was vaguely aware that Riley was working at the keypad again, but mostly what she knew was that if something didn’t change, she was going to die by falling into a sun.

“Come on.” Riley’s fingers were working furiously, but she couldn’t help but feel like it was taking longer than it had last time to counter Ashton. “Tsilpinski sequence,” he muttered. “This’ll get him.”

“Jettison held. Escape pod stabilised.”

Martha squeezed Riley’s shoulder. “You’re pretty good.” They were both sweating and breathing hard.

The familiar sound of keystrokes filled the pod, and Riley jumped back to the keypad, duelling against Ashton once more.

“Jettison activated.”

Martha looked hopefully at Riley, but he was looking helplessly at the keypad. “He’s smashed the circuit. I can’t stop it. I can’t stop it!”

Martha watched Ashton move away from the door. “Riley! Ashton’s gone, let’s get out of here before the pod jettisons.”

“Airlock sealed,” the computer announced.

Martha pushed at the hatch, but it wouldn’t open. “This thing’s locked!”

“Airlock decompression completed. Jettisoning pod.”

She and Riley exchanged a look of horror. If the pod had been jettisoned, there was only one person that could save them. Martha pounded on the hatch and called for the Doctor.

“Martha, it’s too late,” Riley told her, sounding resigned to dying.
But she could see the Doctor through the portholes, trying to say something. “Doctor!” His lips kept moving, but she couldn’t tell what he was saying. “I can’t hear you!”

She heard a loud pop and hiss and realised a moment later, as the Doctor’s face got smaller, that the escape pod was free of the ship, floating towards the sun.

He looked so desperate, and Martha knew losing a friend would eat him up. “I’m sorry,” she whispered as she slouched down.

Riley moved closer to her, and they both watched the ship get smaller as they were drawn ever closer to the sun. “The wonderful world of space travel,” he said. “The prettier it looks, the more likely it is to kill you.”

“He’ll come for us,” Martha said quietly.

“No, it’s too late,” Riley told her fatalistically. “Our heat shields will pack it in any minute, and then we go into free fall. We’ll fall into the sun way before he has a chance to do anything.”

But Martha refused to believe the man who’d been so determined not to lose another life that he worked a genetic miracle to save a pig-mutant would let her go without a fight.

“You don’t know the Doctor. I believe in him.” Another thought occurred to her. “And there’s always Rose, if he can’t do anything.”

Riley sighed. “Then you’re lucky. I’ve never found anyone worth believing in.”

She sat back from the window and took in the bitter resignation on his face. “No girlfriend? Boyfriend?”

He smiled wryly. “The job doesn’t lend itself to stable relationships.”

“Family, then?” Martha suggested, having a hard time comprehending a life without any ties at all.

Riley stared stoically out the window. “My dad’s dead, and I haven’t seen my mum in six years.” He looked over at Martha. “She didn’t want me to sign up for cargo tours. Things were said, and since then… all silent. She wanted to hold on to me; I know that. Oh, she’s so stubborn.”

Martha thought of the way her mum had tried to get her to leave the Doctor alone. “Yeah, well, that’s families.”

“What about you?”

She rolled her eyes. “Full works. Mum, Dad, Dad’s girlfriend, brother, sister. No silence there. So much noise.” The full truth of the moment slammed into her. “Oh, God! They’ll never know! I, I’ll just have disappeared, and they’ll always be waiting.”

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The Doctor sprinted through the corridors towards Area 17. Ashton stood by a control panel, but what was more concerning was the welding helmet he wore. Korwin hadn’t wanted to open his eyes, and then he’d somehow vaporised Abi. If Ashton had been affected as well, a welding helmet would allow him to roam the ship without burning up everything in sight.

“He’s enough!” the Doctor ordered. “I know these people hurt you, but we’re trying to make it right. If you’ll let us go, you can have the ship—take back what they took.”
Instead of answering, Ashton put his fist through the keypad.

The Doctor stared at him as he stalked towards him. “Come on. Give them a chance to do the right thing.” Ashton got right in his face, and they looked at each other nose to nose. “Can you understand what I’m saying?”

Ashton raised his hand to the visor, and for a moment, the Doctor felt a hint of fear. What was he doing, negotiating with a man who could kill him on the spot? But instead of flipping the visor up and incinerating him, Ashton stumbled back several steps and doubled over, grunting in pain.

The Doctor watched in astonishment as he straightened, then ran past him towards the main part of the ship. He jabbed at the intercom, calling the captain. “McDonnell? Ashton’s heading in your direction. He’s been infected, just like Korwin!”

“Korwin’s dead, Doctor,” Scannell told him.

The Doctor realised that must have been what had stopped Ashton. All the cells of that sun were connected, and when one hurt, they all hurt. Well, that explains why they’re so angry.

“Airlock decompression completed. Jettisoning pod.”

The Doctor froze for a moment when the computer announced that. It hadn’t clicked when it had earlier said the airlock was sealed—but of course the airlock would have to be sealed before the pod could be jettisoned.

He turned to the window and looked through at Martha, tapping on the pod’s hatch. “I’ll save you!” he promised. She kept beating at the door, and he repeated himself three more times, not looking away from the pod until it started drifting away from the ship.

Then he turned back to the intercom. “Scannell! I need a spacesuit in Area 17 now!”

“What for?”

The Doctor was fed up with his constant questioning. “Just get down here!”

*Doctor, what’s wrong?*

He groaned and rested his head against the hull plating. The one good thing about this whole miserable day was that Rose was safely out of harm’s way. He really didn’t want to tell her what was going on, because he had a feeling if she knew, she’d find a way to get onto the ship and into danger. Until Martha and Riley were back on board, all evacuation plans were on hold.

But there wasn’t any way to evade the question. *The sun is infecting the crew one at a time. One of them just jettisoned the escape pod Martha was hiding in.*

*What are you going to do?*

*I’m going to reach outside the ship and remagnetise the pod.*

*Couldn’t I materialise around the pod?*

He was shaking his head before Rose even finished the thought. *You’d have to have their current coordinates, and be able to calculate the exact rate of drift to pinpoint the right spot. And even if you managed that, you’d need to get the TARDIS away from the sun, and pulling away from a gravitational field like that isn’t easy.*
The Doctor hesitated for a moment. The last thing he wanted to do was alarm Rose further, but this honestly was one of the riskier things he’d done, and he couldn’t do it without telling her one last time.

Rose.

Yes, Doctor?

I love you.

Rose stared at the time rotor in horror. The Doctor didn’t shy away from those words, but saying them in a moment like this meant he didn’t know if he would have a chance later.

The TARDIS hummed, voicing her concern. Rose looked up at the ceiling, then planted her hands on the console and leaned forward. It’s time to get to the ship, Dear. There’s just a twenty… maybe fifty foot jump over. We can do that, right?

The lights flashed.

Rose took a deep breath. The Doctor had shown her how to calculate the coordinates and set them, but this would be the first time since the Game Station that she would do it herself.

The maths for the actual coordinates wasn’t difficult, but staring at the array of dials and levers on the navigation panel, Rose was petrified she would make a mistake. Help me out, she said, and opened herself up as much as she could to the TARDIS.

Images flashed through her brain like one of those animated flip books, far too quickly for her to pick up any of the directions.

Slow down, she told the ship. One at a time. Just show me the right control and let me know when I’ve got it set where it needs to be.

A single image crystallised in her mind, and she adjusted the dial until she knew it was in the right position. In this way, step by step, the ship taught her how to truly pilot her.

It was a slow process, certainly slower than the way she’d seen the Doctor fly around the console, turning knobs and throwing levers. But he didn’t have to look at the instruction manual as he worked either.

The TARDIS showed her a picture of a supernova, and Rose paused for a moment, then realised she was saying the Doctor had thrown the manual into a supernova. “Oh, that’s very him,” she muttered as she slid a control into place.

She waited, but no more pictures were given to her. Is that it? The lights flashed again. Rose took a deep breath and threw the dematerialisation lever.

Scannell’s arrival interrupted the Doctor’s conversation with Rose. He felt her fear, but there wasn’t anything he could do about it now.

The Doctor got into the suit with maximum efficiency. There was no way he was going to let Martha
die out here, not when there was a possibility he could save her life.

“I can’t let you do this,” Scannell said.

The Doctor looked up at him, continuing to buckle the spacesuit together automatically. “You’re wasting your breath, Scannell. You’re not going to stop me.”

“You want to open an airlock in flight on a ship spinning into the sun. No one can survive that.”

“Believe me, I don’t plan on dying,” the Doctor scoffed. “Or have you forgotten that my wife is still on our ship?”

That gave the man pause, but after a second, he shook his head again. “You open that airlock, it’s suicide. This close to the sun, the shields will barely protect you.”

The Doctor started talking just as fast as Scannell had. “If I can boost the magnetic lock on the ship’s exterior, it should remagnetise the pod.” He reached for the helmet, then looked back at the other man. “Now, while I’m out there, you have got to get the rest of those doors open. We need those auxiliary engines.” He remembered as soon as he said it that Scannell couldn’t get through the secured doors alone, but the other man didn’t bother pointing that out.

“Doctor, will you listen! They’re too far away. It’s too late.”

“I’m not going to lose her,” the Doctor said, and put the helmet on.

The Doctor pressed the button on the airlock controls that would open the door and then start the decompression sequence immediately. He walked inside and stared out at the sun, visible through the hatch on the other side of the room. Although he had denied it, realistically he knew this plan was dangerous at best and fatal at worst.

And if I regenerate, will I survive long enough to get somewhere safe, or will I just continue burning through my regenerations until I have none left? He carefully hid that thought away before Rose could catch it, and forced himself to concentrate on what he was about to do.

“Decompression initiated,” the computer said. “Impact in twelve fifty five.”

At Riley’s suggestion, Martha pulled her upgraded phone out of her back pocket and hit the speed dial number for her mum. Riley took her free hand, and she squeezed it tight while she waited for her to pick up.

“Hello.”

She barely held in a sob when she heard her mother’s voice. “Hi, Mum,” she said, aware that her voice was shaky.

Always attuned to her children’s emotions, Francine asked, “Is everything all right?”

Martha looked up at Riley, who smiled encouragingly. “Yeah. Of course.”

“Martha?”

“Mum, I…” She took a deep breath and got down to the real reason she was calling. “You know I love you, don’t you?”
“Of course I do,” her mum reassured her. “What’s bought this on?”

“I never say it. I never get the time. I never think of it, and it’s like Rose said, sometimes you just
realise that one day, you might run out of time. I really love you.” She hesitated, knowing the next bit
would worry her mum even more than she already was, but she couldn’t just leave it. “Tell Dad, Leo
and Tish that I love them.”

“Martha, what’s wrong?”

Martha could hear the fear in her mum’s voice and hated that she couldn’t tell her the truth, even
though she wasn’t ever going to see her again. “Nothing. I promise.”

Riley’s eyes met hers, and she saw sympathy and understanding there. He shifted and offered to
wrap an arm around her shoulders, and Martha gratefully leaned against him.

“Well, then what are you doing today?”

She looked up at Riley and smiled. “I’m out with some mates.”

Her mum sighed. “Martha, you know you need to focus on your studies if you want to finish school
and become a doctor.”

For once, the familiar argument was comforting, rather than annoying. “Mum, my schoolwork is
fine.”

“You’ve been out three nights in a row now,” she said, and Martha could picture her shaking her
head. “I know your trip to the moon and the drama last night with the Doctor were exhilarating, but
that’s not your real life.”

Martha wasn’t sure how to answer that, since this was her real life. “Mum, can we not just talk?” she
said finally.

There was a brief pause, then her mum said, “Of course. What do you want to talk about?”

“I don’t know, anything!” she said, aware that she wasn’t keeping the tears out of her voice anymore
and not even caring. When she didn’t come home, when she’d been missing for months, her mum
would have this conversation and would know she’d been saying goodbye. “What you had for
breakfast, what you watched on telly last night, how much you’re going to kill Dad next time you
see him. Just anything.”

“Your sister has a new job, working for Harold Saxon,” her mum said.

“Yeah, I talked to her earlier,” Martha said, just barely registering in time that for her mum, this was
still the day after the gala. “She was already busy, even though he gave her the day off.”

“Well, tomorrow is Election Day. I’m not sure why he thought he could spare a PR person today of
all days.”

Martha laughed—how typical of her mum, criticising how the future Prime Minister ran his office.
“I’d better let you go, Mum. Love you!”

“I love you, too. Call again soon.”

Hanging up on her mum was one of the hardest things she’d ever done, and she turned in Riley’s
arms and cried on his shoulder. He pressed a kiss to her forehead, and the simple act of comfort gave
her hope.

With eleven minutes left before the ship would be held by the sun’s gravitational field, the Doctor
opened the outer airlock door. He kept his eyes averted from the sun as best he could, knowing it
was alive and angry.

There was a subtle shift in his connection to Rose and the TARDIS, and he realised they’d moved
into the main part of the ship. At least we’ll be ready to leave as soon as Riley and Martha are back
on board, he thought, though he knew better than to think Rose had any intention of just staying in
the TARDIS, waiting for them to arrive.

Focusing on the task in front of him, the Doctor pressed a button on the door’s control panel, and it
slid open. He climbed through the door and stretched, reaching for the control panel only a few feet
away. The heat was intense, but he knew (well, he hoped) his superior biology could handle it for a
short stretch.

It wasn’t quite as easy to maintain his hold on the door and reach for the buttons at the same time as
he’d thought, and he flailed around, nearly falling out of the ship as he tried to manoeuvre to the right
side of the door.

Finally, he pushed himself upright with a loud grunt and stretched towards the controls positioned
above the door. “Come on! Go on, my son!” he muttered.

He managed to hit the first two buttons, but the lever that would finish the remagnetisation was just
outside of his reach.

“Doctor, how’re you doing?” Scannell asked.

“Not good. I can’t reach!” The sun was searing through the suit, and he knew he’d have burns
tonight if he survived this. “I don’t know how much longer I can last.”

“Come on. Don’t give up now.”

Encouragement from a man who’d been nothing but a naysayer from the moment they’d met gave
the Doctor the extra bit of oomph he needed to grab the handle on the box and yank it down,
revealing the lever. He pulled it with a shout of triumph…

…And of course, that was when things went pear-shaped. The Doctor pushed himself back into the
airlock and automatically looked to see if the escape pod was coming back. When he did, he caught
a full glimpse of the sun, and a moment later, he felt the angry burning in his head.

Oh, of course. That’s how the infection spreads—via the eyes.

The Doctor screwed his eyes shut and fumbled back towards the airlock door. Scannell had warned
him that he needed to get out of there before the pod came back, and he knew he was right.

The sun scorched him from the inside out, trying to take over. His body stayed one step ahead of it
though, fighting the infestation valiantly. But until they dumped all the fuel, he was just as much of a
danger as Korwin or Ashton.

The escape pod shuddered, jolting Martha out of Riley’s arms. They stared at the control panel
together, and a magic word flashed onto the screen: remagnetising.

“We’re being pulled back!” Riley said in disbelief.

“I told you!” Martha said. “It’s the Doctor!”

They watched gleefully as they drew closer and closer to the ship, and finally, with a thud, they docked. As soon as the airlock was pressurised again, they stumbled out of the pod, then through the door back into the main part of the ship.

The Doctor was the first thing Martha saw. “Doctor! Doctor!” He didn’t reply, and she realised he was crawling across the floor like he was in pain. “Are you okay?”

He rocked back, a grimace on his face. His eyes opened in narrow slits for a moment, and white light shone from them. “Stay away from me,” he growled.

The captain ran up to them. “What’s happened?”

“I looked into the sun,” the Doctor said, out of breath and panting. “I’ve been infected like Korwin and Ashton, but thanks to my superior biology, I’ve been able to hold it off.” He writhed on the floor for a moment, then said, “You need to vent the engines and dump the fuel. Give back what you took.”

“Riley, get down to Area 10 and help Scannell with the doors. When you get to the bridge, do as the Doctor says,” McDonnell ordered. Riley looked at her in dazed confusion, and she pointed. “Go!”

The Doctor kept his eyes closed, but turned in the direction he thought Martha was. “You’ve got to freeze me, quickly.”

“What?”

It was the only thing he could think of that might save his life, and keep him from infecting anyone else. “Stasis chamber. You’ve got to take it below minus two hundred. Freeze it out of me!” Pain lanced through his body as the sun continued to attack his system, and he was moaning in agony after almost every word. “It’ll use me to kill you if you don’t. The closer we get to the sun, the stronger it gets! Med centre, quickly! Quickly!”

“Help me!” Martha said, and a moment later, the Doctor felt the women take his arms and drape them over their shoulders so they could take him to the med centre.

It was hard to concentrate on anything but taking the next step and fighting the parasite, but Rose’s fear and confusion wouldn’t be ignored. “I’ve been infected, he told her. They’re taking me to the med centre. Stay in the TARDIS where it’s safe, Rose.

The pain overtook him again, the living sun burning hotter by the second. Martha kept muttering nervously, telling him it was going to be all right, that they’d get him to the stasis chamber and everything would be sorted, but he knew the chances of that were slimmer than he’d let on to anyone.

Then he sensed Rose’s presence quickly coming closer, and the comforting feel of it overruled his frustration that she’d put herself in danger, again.

Finally, he felt the plastic flaps at the door to the med centre, and he tried to sigh in relief, but instead it came out as another grunt of pain. With Martha’s and McDonnell’s help, he staggered towards the bed for the stasis chamber.
Martha let go of his arm, and the Doctor reached out for her in a panic. He needed someone to keep him grounded. “Martha, where are you?” A familiar hand took his, and he sighed. “Rose.”

Almost immediately after the TARDIS landed, Rose felt something foreign shudder through her—then she realised, it wasn’t her, it was the Doctor. There was something working its way into every system of his body, trying to take him over.

I’ve been infected, he said in answer to her obvious question. They’re taking me to the med centre. Stay in the TARDIS where it’s safe, Rose.

She huffed in exasperation at that instruction. The TARDIS seemed to be rolling her eyes too, and Rose patted a strut before walking out of the ship.

Looking around her, she realised she had no idea where she was, or how to find the Doctor. She bit her lip, then closed her eyes and focused on the bond. Getting a direction, she opened her eyes and started running.

The Doctor was moving, and she realised they hadn’t reached the med centre yet. Rose kept going, trusting their bond to keep her on track. She could tell she was almost there when she ran up a flight of stairs. Turning left down a corridor, she saw an open doorway with orangish light flooding out of it.

“Martha, where are you?” he yelled as she ran into the room.

He was kneeling on the floor, gasping and panting. Rose took his hand before Martha could even turn around, and he sighed her name.

She squeezed his hand, then helped the unknown woman in the room lift the Doctor up onto the table. “Yeah, I’m here,” she told him. “Martha’s going to… What are you doing, Martha?”

“Putting him in a stasis chamber at -200 degrees,” Martha said, scanning the manual and looking at the controls.

“No, you don’t know how this equipment works,” the other woman yelled. “You’ll kill him. Nobody can survive those temperatures.”

Rose stroked her thumb over the Doctor’s. “My husband isn’t human,” she told the stranger absently. “If he were, he would have succumbed to the infection already, yeah?”

The woman acknowledged the point. “Let me help you, then.”

Martha glared at her from where she was standing in front of the controls. “You’ve done enough damage.”

“Ten seconds,” the Doctor grunted. “That’s all I’ll be able to take. No more.” He moaned in pain, and Rose pressed her lips to keep from echoing him. “Rose?”

Rose gently wiped the sweat from his brow. “Yeah?” she said.

He made a choking sound, then said, “It’s burning me up—I can’t control it. If you don’t get rid of it, I could kill you. I could kill you all.” His voice was hoarse and feral, and it didn’t sound like the Doctor at all. But then he let out a scream, and the next words were all him. “I’m scared! I’m so scared!”
Martha came to the Doctor’s other side and leaned down over him. “Just stay calm. You saved me, now I return the favour,” she said, not sounding like she believed what she was saying. “Just believe in me.”

The Doctor’s back arched against the pain. “It’s burning through me. Then what’ll happen?”

Martha bit her lip and turned back to the controls, the fear on her face obvious. Rose couldn’t bring herself to speak; she concentrated on giving him light caresses and offering as much telepathic comfort as she could. The Doctor latched onto it greedily, and she thought some of the tension on his face seemed to ease a little.

“Rose. If I… if I regenerate—no, listen,” he insisted when she tried to interrupt. “I told you I wouldn’t do something like this without letting you know what to expect.”

She caught the reference immediately, and knew exactly what he would say next. Even though she hated the thought of him regenerating, she pressed her lips together and let him explain.

“Regenerating hurts.” His face spasmed and his grunt of pain reinforced the bald statement. “I won’t be able to avoid it. Your whole body will feel like it’s being taken apart and put back together again. I’m sorry.”

Rose leaned over and brushed her lips against the Doctor’s, trying to ease his unnecessary guilt. Being bonded means shared pain as well as joy, my Doctor. She pulled back and brushed the sweat-dampened hair off of his forehead, then traced the line of his jaw with her fingertips. Don’t be afraid. I will always be here for you.

Rose looked at Martha, who nodded. “Are you ready?” she asked the Doctor.

“No,” he said, but Martha ignored him and used a large joystick to roll the bed into the chamber. Rose moved to stand in front of it, staring at her bond mate writhing in fear and agony.

She heard Martha hit some buttons, and then the Doctor screamed, more from terror than pain. Rose shuddered and clasped her hands in front of her, hating that they had to do this, but knowing it was the only chance he had, aside from regeneration.

Frost spread across his face, then suddenly the stasis chamber turned off, along with all the lights in the med-centre.

The Doctor stirred. “No! Martha, you can’t stop it. Not yet.”

Martha looked from the blank screen to the stasis chamber. “What happened?” she gasped.

The other woman set her jaw and stared at the door. “Power’s been cut in Engineering.”

Rose stared at the Doctor. They were running out of time. His presence in her mind was more feral and less him with every passing moment. And now, someone had interfered with their one chance to save him.

“Who’s down there?” she asked in a low voice.

“Leave it to me.” The woman strode out of the med centre.

Inside the stasis chamber, the Doctor writhed and grunted with the effort it took his body to keep the parasite from taking him over. Martha and Rose looked at each other, both hoping the power came back in time.
The frost had entirely melted off the Doctor’s body, and Martha started tapping at the controls to the stasis chamber in a vain hope that it would start working again. “Come on. You’re defrosting,” she said under her breath.

“Rose!” the Doctor yelled. “Martha!”

“We’re here, Doctor,” Rose assured him.

His whole body trembled. “I’ve only got a moment. You’ve got to go. Get in the TARDIS.”

“What?” Martha asked, while Rose exclaimed, “Not happening!”

“Rose, listen to me,” he ground out. “I can’t fight this much longer. If Riley and Scannell don’t reach the front of the ship soon and vent the fuel, I’ll be completely consumed.”

“I don’t care,” she said stubbornly.

“But I do!” he screamed. “I couldn’t stand it if I hurt you. Rose, please!”

That fear broke through her reluctance—if the Doctor hurt her while he was… possessed, the guilt would cripple him. Rose blinked back tears. “All right. But I’ll be waiting for you, Doctor.”

With one last look at him, she and Martha ran from the room back towards the TARDIS.

Rose paused when she heard the woman’s voice over the intercom. “Riley, Scannell… I’m sorry.”

“McDonnell. McDonnell!” a man cried out.

“Exterior airlock open,” the computer said in response to the cry.

It didn’t take much to figure out what had happened, at least the basics. “Who was she?” Rose asked quietly.

“The captain.”

Rose understood her animosity then. It was on the captain’s authority that the crew had taken part of that sun. This had all happened because of her.

The Doctor’s struggle to hold back the infection was giving Rose a headache, and she moaned and rubbed at her temples. “It’s getting worse,” she said. “If they can’t… if they don’t get rid of the fuel soon, we’re all going to die.”

“Martha!” the Doctor called out over the intercom.

Rose shook her head frantically. “Doctor, please! Just a few more minutes.”

“I can’t fight it, Rose. Give it back or—” He grunted. “Burn with me. Burn with me, Martha.”

The ship lurched, and Martha stared at Rose. “What was that? What’s happening?”

The pain that had been steadily building in Rose’s head suddenly disappeared, and she breathed a sigh of relief. “I think the fuel must have been dumped.”

The Doctor’s presence was clear in her mind again, and without another thought, Rose pivoted and ran back the way she’d come. The ship shifted again when the engines fired up, and she grabbed onto a railing to keep from getting thrown to the deck.
Once the ship steadied, she started running again. Rounding a corner, she saw him at the bottom of the stairs she’d climbed earlier, getting to his feet unsteadily. The unzipped spacesuit had been peeled off his upper body and hung around his waist.

He held his arms out, and she jumped into them, wrapping her arms around his neck and pressing kisses to his jaw, his cheek, anything she could reach, while the Doctor was kissing her hair and her temple as he slowly lowered her to the ground.

The moment her toes touched the ground, she pulled his head down and surged up to meet him in a kiss. He groaned and pulled her tight against him with his hands on her hips. Rose flicked her tongue against his lips and the Doctor opened his mouth instantly, humming in pleasure when her tongue brushed against his.

The hands on her hips slid down to grab her bum, and she moaned her approval of that, not even caring that Martha would probably find them shortly. But the Doctor picked up on that thought and moved one hand to her waist, running the other up and down her back.

He pulled back when he could tell she needed to breathe and pressed his forehead to hers. “Rose,” he whispered.

“I’m here, my Doctor.” She caressed his face, and he leaned into her touch for a moment before lowering his lips to hers for another kiss.

“I was so scared,” he said when he pulled back again. “If I had hurt you…”

“But you didn’t. You didn’t, Doctor.”

He took a half step back and cupped her face in his hands. “Thank you for leaving when I asked,” he said earnestly.

Rose waited; she could tell he wanted to remind her that he’d also asked her to stay on the TARDIS. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then kissed her gently.

_I’m glad you came anyway_, he told her. She pulled back and looked at him, wide-eyed, and his ears turned red, like she’d discovered a secret of his. _Oh, I’m always selfishly glad to have you with me, even when I wish you would stay somewhere safe._

Rose brushed her knuckles against his jaw. _And I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else._

She leaned against his chest and he wrapped his arms around her in a tight embrace. The Doctor kissed the top of her head, then encouraged her to bury her face in the crook of his neck.

“We made it,” Rose murmured after their emotions settled down a little.

The Doctor smiled. “Of course we did. The Doctor and Rose Tyler: the stuff of legends.”

Rose snorted. “Could stand with being a little less legendary for a while, frankly.”

He could feel her weariness as the adrenaline wore off, and he had to admit, he wouldn’t mind avoiding trouble for a while, either. “Hmmm… The Doctor and Rose Tyler: the stuff of pretty interesting tales?”

He felt her cheeks stretch into a smile.

The Doctor chuckled. After one last squeeze, he said, “Come on, let’s sit down. I don’t know about you, but I find being legendary takes a lot of energy.”

Martha took her time following after Rose, knowing she and the Doctor would need a few minutes alone together. When she found them, they were sitting on the steps, leaning against each other.

“Martha!” The Doctor jumped to his feet and pulled her into a hug. “Look at us, we all made it.”

She took a step back and smiled. “Never doubted it for a minute.”

The Doctor’s bulky spacesuit had fallen around his ankles, and Rose helped him step out of it. When he was back to his blue suit, he pointed in the direction Rose and Martha had come from. “Is the TARDIS that way?”

“What’s the TARDIS?” Riley asked from the top of the stairs.

The Doctor craned his neck and looked at him. “It’s our ship. Come take a look.”

Rose led the way, her hand tightly clasped in the Doctor’s. Riley stepped up beside Martha and whispered, “I still haven’t figured out how you managed to land inside the venting chamber.”

“You’ll understand when you see the TARDIS,” Martha told him. “She’s different from any other ship you’ve ever seen.”

She drew a deep breath when they turned a corner and she saw the blue box only ten feet away. Despite what she’d told the Doctor, there’d been more than one point today when she hadn’t been sure they would make it out of this one.

Scannell circled the TARDIS. “This is never your ship.”

“Compact, eh? And another good word, robust.” The Doctor patted the door. “Barely a scorch mark on her.”

Martha hated the thought of abandoning Riley and Scannell. “We can’t just leave you drifting with no fuel.”

Riley smiled at her. “We’ve sent out an official mayday. The authorities’ll pick us up soon enough.”

“Though how we explain what happened…” Scannell shook his head.

“Just tell them.” The Doctor opened the TARDIS and let Rose step inside first. “That sun needs care and protection just like any other living thing.”

He disappeared through the doors and Martha went to follow him, but Riley grabbed her arm. “So, er, you’re off then. No chance I’ll see you again?”

This was a complication of time travel she hadn’t considered. “Not really.” He looked a little dejected, so she hastened to add, “It was nice, not dying with you.” They laughed together, and she offered the last bit of encouragement she could give. “I reckon you’ll find someone worth believing in.”

Riley looked at her meaningfully. “I think I already did.” He looked down at the floor.

Martha considered what she was about to do for less than a second, then she stretched up and
pressed her lips to his in a firm kiss. She felt his surprise, then acceptance and enthusiasm.

She stepped back and looked at his dazed expression. “Well done. Very hot,” she added as she stepped into the TARDIS.

“Are we ready to go then?” the Doctor asked once she’d shut the door behind her.

“No argument from me,” Martha said. “After almost dying…” Her eyes widened. “Oh no! Mum!” She pulled her mobile out of her pocket. “I’m just going to…” She pointed to her phone and they both nodded. “I’ll see you for dinner,” she told them, and started for her room.

As she curled up in the chair in her room, she felt the distinctive shudder of the TARDIS leaving a place. For the second time that day, she pressed her mum’s speed dial number and waited for her to pick up.

“Hello?” her mum said, sounding distracted.

“It’s me again,” Martha told her.

“Two calls in one day.”

The question was obvious, and Martha gave the best excuse she could think of for the earlier call, knowing it really wasn’t very good. “I’m sorry about earlier. Over-emotional, mad day.”

“What are you doing tomorrow night?” her mum asked. “Why don’t you come round? I’ll make something nice and we can catch up.”

Martha nodded, even though her mum couldn’t see her. “Yeah. Tomorrow. Do my best.” She thought back to the earlier conversation. “So… that would be Election Day, yeah?” she asked, cringing as the words left her mouth.

“Of course it will be.”

“Right. Of course. I’ll be round for tea. Roughly.”

“And…” Her mum hesitated, then added, in a stilted voice, “You could bring the Doctor and Rose, if you wanted. I assume they’re the mates you were out with earlier.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Martha said. “See you later. Love you.”

After Martha left the console room, the Doctor turned to Rose. “I could use a little help,” he admitted, feeling the tell-tale tightness in the skin on his back that indicated he had indeed been burned.

“All right,” she agreed, her voice soft and not holding even hint of recrimination. “Med bay or our room?”

“Our room should be fine, I think. It’s not that serious.”

Five minutes later when he felt the skin pull as he slowly took his suit off, he realised it had been slightly more serious than he’d thought.

Rose stilled his hands. “Let me,” she said, and the Doctor stood quietly while she helped him out of the rest of his clothes, stripping him down to his pants. “Oh, Doctor,” she murmured when she saw
the burns on his back.

He could feel her hand hovering over the damaged skin, but she didn’t touch him. The Doctor lay down on the bed without being prompted, wincing when the motion stretched the tight skin.

“You’ll need your sonic,” he told her, turning his head so he could see her.

Rose nodded and pulled it out of her pocket. “What setting?” she asked.

“451 heals burns.”

She adjusted the controls, then pointed the sonic at him. When the tip glowed violet, the Doctor felt a cool touch running over his back. His skin tingled, then itched as she healed him.

He sighed and relaxed into the bed when she finished the last spot. “Thank you,” he told her, feeling more tired than he’d expected.

“Were they just on your back?” she asked.

“Yeah. I had my back to the sun almost the whole time. Even my right hand and arm didn’t get more than a typical sunburn.”

He felt Rose turn his arm over and inspect the pink skin. “Hmmm…” she said, but evidently, she agreed with his assessment, because she didn’t insist on taking care of them with the sonic.

“I’ve never used my sonic screwdriver to heal injuries before,” she said as she stretched out next to him.

The Doctor rolled onto his side so he could look at her. “Amazing what you can do if you know how to manipulate sound waves, isn’t it?”

Rose’s answer was interrupted by the Doctor’s stomach growling. After their giggles faded, he pushed himself out of bed. “Martha said something about dinner, didn’t she?” he asked as he reached for his clothes.

She nodded, and then watched in bemusement as he dressed.

“What?” he asked as he tied his tie.

“How do you manage to put so many layers on so quickly? It takes me at least twice as long to get you out of them.”

“Well, I do have more practice getting dressed than you have undressing me.” He shrugged his shoulders into his jacket.

“And I suppose I’m usually a little distracted when I’m undressing you,” Rose quipped as she climbed off the bed.

The Doctor chuckled, then took her hand. “Come on. We were barely on that ship for an hour, but somehow it still felt like a long day. I’m ready for a relaxing evening at home.”

oOoOoOoOo

When Rose stumbled into the galley at 2 am, she was surprised to find Martha there. “Couldn’t sleep?”
The other woman barely smiled as she turned her mobile over in her hands. “When you started travelling with the Doctor, what did your family think?”

Rose filled the kettle and turned it on. “My mum hated it. We told you he brought me home twelve months late, yeah?”

“God, my mum would kill him if he kept me away for a whole year.” Martha frowned. “Forget Mum, I’d kill him. I’ve worked too hard at school to mess up now.”

“Is your mum giving you a hard time about the Doctor?” Rose pulled out two mugs and raised her eyebrows at Martha.

“Yeah, thanks.” Martha sighed. “No, she’s being more passive aggressive, which is weird, because normally she’s almost too straightforward. She’s not actually saying anything against either of you, but she keeps dropping hints that I shouldn’t spend time with you, or that I should be focusing on school instead.” She looked down at the table, then back at Rose. “I called her today, from the escape pod.”

Rose nodded sympathetically. “Of course you did. I once tried to call my mum from a planet in orbit around a black hole.”

“I have a feeling I might have… encouraged some of her concerns.”

The kettle boiled, and Rose poured water over the waiting teabags. “Well, what’s the worst that can happen if your mum doesn’t like the Doctor?” She handed a mug to Martha, then got the milk out. “She can’t really stop you from travelling if you want to, and there isn’t anything she can do to us.”

Tension eased out of Martha’s shoulders, and Rose smiled. “Feel better?”

“Yeah, thanks Rose.” Martha looked at her phone. “I think I’ll put this away until we’re ready to go back to London. No reason to stir up more drama.”

Francine pressed the phone to her mouth and stared at the wall. She knew her daughter, and Martha had no intention of coming round for tea the next day. Part of her hoped she wouldn’t, because whatever Harold Saxon wanted the Doctor for, he clearly wasn’t averse to hurting the people close to him to make it happen.

On the other hand… She closed her eyes and the image of Tish in a prison cell flashed across her retinas. She hadn’t believed Agent Dexter until the cold woman had shown her the video feed from the cell, and now she would never forget it.

“Well, Mrs. Jones?” Dexter asked.

Francine took a breath and steeled herself before turning around. “I’m sure you were listening. She’ll be here for tea tomorrow.”

Dexter stood up from the dining table and held out a plastic bag, and Francine dropped the phone into it. “It didn’t sound like she wanted to bring the Doctor, though,” the agent said as she sealed the bag. “Do you think that will be a problem?”

“If the Doctor and his wife aren’t with her when she arrives, I’ll find a way to ask about their whereabouts,” Francine promised through gritted teeth. She hated the thought of betraying Martha’s friends, but if the choice was between this Doctor and her eldest daughter, what else could she do?
“Is that all?” she asked.

“For now,” Dexter said, and the knot in Francine’s gut tightened at the implicit threat. “Don’t forget to vote tomorrow.”

Francine smiled tightly. “I won’t,” she promised. “Though you might not be happy with who I’m voting for.”

It was an empty gesture and they both knew it. Harold Saxon had had the election locked up from the beginning. But if giving her vote to the other party was the only way Francine had to voice her anger, she would take it.

A smirk crossed Dexter’s face. “Thanks for all you’re doing, Mrs. Jones. Mr. Saxon will be very grateful.”

Somehow, Francine managed to bite back the suggestions of what Harold Saxon could do with his gratitude and force a closed-mouth smile onto her face. “Just make sure my daughter is taken care of,” she ordered.

Dexter’s eyebrows rose. “Of course, Mrs. Jones. As long as you and your family continue to cooperate, no harm will come to Letitia.”

Chapter End Notes

There’s just one more chapter left before we get to the Human Nature arc. I’ve had more fun with that section of the story than any other, and I can’t wait to start sharing it.
For a week after they were nearly burnt to a crisp by a living sun, the TARDIS and her passengers managed to avoid trouble, visiting a series of peaceful planets and intergalactic bazaars. Then one morning, Martha overheard Rose tell the Doctor that she was ready to be legendary again. Even though she didn’t know the private joke her friend was clearly referencing, she got the meaning. After that, they flitted in and out of trouble, mixing fun trips with true adventures. Martha was starting to really understand why Rose and the Doctor loved their life so much—having the entire universe at your fingertips was fun.

But it was also overwhelming. So when the Doctor turned to her a month later and said, “Your turn to pick, Martha! Where do you want to go—anywhere at all,” she froze.

“All place?” she asked, stalling for time.

He put his hands in his pockets and nodded. “Barring proximity to fixed points and unsafe events.”

“Fixed…” She shook her head. “You know what, tell me later. Uh…” Martha stammered, aware that her mouth was hanging open a little. “Well…” She cast about frantically for some kind of place that she enjoyed going on holidays. “Oh! Let’s go to the zoo.”

The Doctor’s smile disappeared and his expression seemed to close off. Martha blinked a few times, wondering if she was misreading him, but he seemed… disappointed. Not by her suggestion, but by her.

“Oh, why would you want to do that?” he asked finally. “Anywhere in time and space, and you want to go to the zoo? Come on!”

Martha tilted her head and looked at him. His eyes were hard—not like they got when he looked at their enemies, but still, not the same warm brown she was used to. Her gaze flicked over to Rose—the other woman was smiling apologetically, but there was something in her expression too, like she understood why the Doctor had reacted the way he had, and she agreed with him.

She drew in a breath. “I didn’t mean to upset you,” she said honestly.

The Doctor pulled a face. “Upset me?” Rose poked him in the ribs, and he sighed. “I don’t like the thought of anything being in a cage,” he said quietly.

As soon as he said it, Martha felt silly for not expecting he would feel that way. He traveled the universe and as far as she could tell, he never brought specimens home with him—if he were the
type to like zoos, he would have collected at least a few things. She didn’t even know if he’d ever had pets.

“Oh, of course.” She bit her lip, not quite ready to give up the idea of an alien zoo. “But there are plenty without cages these days—even in my time. Surely there’s like, a nature preserve or something? Somewhere we could go where the animals are allowed to live in their natural habitat?”

The Doctor shook his head. “A cage is still a cage, even if it doesn’t have bars.” He picked up a feather and twirled it in his fingers.

Martha stared at it for a moment, then asked, “Seagull?”

He frowned and rubbed at his chin. “I don’t know if I’ve heard of a place called Seagull.”

She pointed at the feather.

“Oh! No, dodo.”

And suddenly, Martha knew where she wanted to go. This was a time machine too, wasn’t it? “That’s where I want to go!” she exclaimed. “I want to see a dodo—in its natural habitat,” she added quickly, before he could lecture her on zoos again.

“That’s something we’ve never done, Doctor,” Rose commented. “Gone back to see what the Earth was like before, I mean. We usually go back to visit people.”

The Doctor stuck the feather in a tiny hole in the console and spun around, setting the coordinates. “You’re right, we haven’t. Maybe we could make a list of all the places to see before they disappear forever.” He cocked his head. “Actually, I think that’s a book.”

“Why’ve you got that there?” Martha asked, pointing at the feather.

“What, that? Well, it’s a dodo feather, isn’t it? The TARDIS is using the DNA to track the best location to see a dodo.” The ship landed, hard. “And here we are!”

oOoOoOoOo

“You know, we should have known this would happen,” Rose said twelve long hours later, when they were sitting in the galley eating chicken tikka.

“This” was the TARDIS landing them not on Mauritius, but in a museum that took up a whole planet, a museum dedicated to preserving the last member of every species in the universe, kept in suspended animation. And a prime exhibit of the Museum of the Last Ones happened to be… a dodo.

Rose shook her head. “Whenever we let her pick the destination, something like this ends up happening.”

“Oh, but think of all the creatures we saved today,” the Doctor protested. “Dinosaurs, a black rhinoceros, and a sabre-toothed tiger… Three billion beings, sent back to their old lives—including Dorothea the Dodo.”

He smiled, but the lines around his eyes were tense, and Rose took his hand under the table. *All three billion beings, my Doctor,* she told him, unable to forget the image of him, the last of the Time Lords, frozen in a moment of time and on display in a Perspex box. *I would never have left you there.*
He clung to her hand. *Thank you.*

Martha tore off a piece of naan, then put it back on her plate. “Can I ask…” She bit her lip, then nodded at Rose. “You knew, when the museum curator trapped the Doctor. And more than that, it hurt you.”

Rose and the Doctor exchanged a wordless conversation, his expression apologetic, hers questioning. He nodded after a moment, and Rose sighed and looked back at Martha.

“We have a telepathic bond,” she explained. “It lets us communicate over long distances.”

Martha looked from Rose to the Doctor and back again. “What does that even mean, telepathic bond?”

Rose pursed her lips and thought for a moment before answering. “It means… we’re connected, mentally, and we always will be.”

“That’s why you felt it when he was struck by lightning,” Martha realised.

Rose cringed. “Yeah. That was not pleasant.” She raised both hands and massaged tiny circles over her temples. “Anyway, it’s not something that’s meant to be tampered with. Ever.”

The lightbulb went on. “But the Doctor was in suspended animation, so your bond felt funny.”

She nodded. “Yeah. He was there, but he was just… stuck.”

The Doctor leaned back in his chair and listened to Rose explain what it had felt like on her end.

“It’s hard to explain, but usually I can feel his mind against mine, moving and shifting as he thinks, just like you’d feel someone’s body moving if you were walking beside him.”

“But I was stuck in one moment of time, and you were still moving,” the Doctor said, catching what she was saying.

Rose reached for his hand over the table. “So, imagine you were holding hands with that person you were walking beside, and then suddenly they stopped moving, but you had to keep going. And you couldn’t let go, either.”

“You’d wrench your arm out of the socket,” Martha said.

The Doctor tensed at the graphic description, but Rose couldn’t deny that the parallel was accurate. “That’s pretty much what it feels like.”

It was the Doctor’s turn to squeeze Rose’s hand. She raised her eyebrows at his guilt-tinged apology. *Not your fault, Doctor—unless you asked to be stuck in a cage.*

When she put it that way, he couldn’t really argue with her. He had been Eve’s elusive One Cent Magenta, as sought after by the curator as the rare stamp was by philatelists. Being reminded of the loss of his people in such a harsh way certainly hadn’t been his idea.

Rose’s jaw set. “I’m glad we shut them down,” she said fiercely. “Cages are bad enough, but to keep creatures locked up permanently like that… it’s inhumane.”

The Doctor painted a wide smile on his face. “But it was fantastic for Martha’s tally,” he said, pointing to the slim tablet sitting on the end of the table. “How many points do you have so far, Martha?”
Upon their arrival on what he’d thought was Mauritius, the Doctor had handed her *The I-Spyder Book of Earth Creatures*, a game for intergalactic travellers. Every creature that was ever native to Earth was listed, along with a point value. Once you reached nine million points, you could send in for a certificate.

Martha glanced down her list—the dodo, mountain gorilla, several dinosaurs, the rhino… “36,599,” she said. “All that stuff we saw, and I haven’t got near enough points. I think it’s impossible.”

The Doctor grinned mysteriously and held out his hand for the device. “Oh, I think there’s one elusive specimen you might be able to track down.” He selected a species and handed the game back to Martha.

She looked at the tablet and laughed. “You’re kidding me.”

“Nope!” He popped the p and felt some of Rose’s concern wane at his genuine amusement. “If you’ll read the description, you have to admit it was a logical assumption.”


“Read it out loud, Martha.”

Martha cleared her throat and Rose and the Doctor both cracked up when she started reciting the text in an over-the-top imitation of nature programmes.

“*Time Lord* (*Dominus temporis*) Location: Worldwide.

The Time Lord is a rare, bipedal, bicardial mammal. It frequently mingles with herds of Homo sapiens—”

Both Rose and Martha cried out in protest of the word herds, but after grumbling for a moment, Martha continued reading.

“—But can be distinguished from them by its unique physiology and distinctive fearless behaviour. It is between approximately 1.5 and 2 metres in height, and can have white, black, brown, or blond hair. It is most commonly found in Europe, especially the United Kingdom.

**Addendum:**

It has been suggested that the Time Lord is of non-terrestrial origin. However, sightings spanning several millennia indicate that, even if it did not originate on Earth, it should now be classified as an immigrant species.

**I-Spyder points value: 8,963,400.**”

Martha paused, then groaned in dismay.

“What?” the Doctor asked.

“I’m still a point short. Just one lousy point!”

“Have you marked human off?” Rose asked, beating the Doctor to the punch.

Martha brightened and scrolled through the list. “Yes!” she crowed. “Two points—that gives me the rank of Arachnid First Class!” She looked hopefully at the Doctor. “I can send in for the certificate, can’t I?”
He laughed. “I don’t see why not. You did all the work to spot those species, even helped save them. If anyone deserves an I-Spy award, it’s you.”

She set the tablet down on the table. “I really love this,” she said earnestly. “The travelling, solving mysteries, helping people…”

Rose smiled. “I can’t imagine living life any other way,” she admitted.

Martha leaned on the table, her chin resting in her hand. “So, Doctor…” she mused. “Are there any great mysteries of the universe that you’ve never tried to solve?”

His left eyebrow arched up to his hairline. “You realise how vast the universe is, don’t you Martha? I’m not sure if I should appreciate the vote of confidence in my abilities, or be upset that you think I’m that old.”

She rolled her eyes. “All right then, what’s one unsolved mystery that intrigues you? Tell me a story, Doctor.”

“Hmmm…” He pressed his tongue against the back of his teeth. “Well, there’s the spaceship Brilliant,” he said after a moment. “Famous passenger ship that just… disappeared. No one knows what happened to it.”

“Not even you?” Martha asked.

He looked at her condescendingly. “That was what you asked for,” he reminded her. “A mystery I haven’t solved. Wouldn’t be much of a mystery if I knew what had happened to it, would it?”


“Thank you, Rose,” Martha said.

“That’s just the thing,” he said slowly. “No one really knows. There are theories, of course,” he added. “But each theory is more outrageous than the one before. The ship just vanished on its maiden voyage.” The Doctor scratched at his neck. “Of course, the one thing people tend to forget is that it vanished on the eve of a huge galactic war. Suspicious timing, that is.”

The Doctor was thankful when an alarm went off in the console room, interrupting the conversation. The fate of the Brilliant tantalised him, but he wasn’t sure it was a good idea to investigate what had happened.

The trio jogged back to the console room and the Doctor swung the monitor around so he could read the TARDIS’ message. “Oh, you have got to be joking,” he muttered.

“What is it?” Rose asked.

“Apparently one of the wormholes we opened this afternoon to send all the animals back where they came from crossed the migration path of the Red-Ridged Lizard from Lacerto.”

“And… that’s bad, I take it,” Martha said.

The Doctor glanced up at her. “Very. The Red-Ridged Lizard migrates every five years back to their breeding ground. These are lizards twice the size of crocodiles, and during breeding season, they’re extremely violent. There’s a reason they call it the red hatching.”
He waited for the TARDIS to finish calculating where the errant wormhole would take the lizard and groaned when the answer popped up on the display. “Oh come on, really?”

“Let me guess,” Rose said drily. “London.”

“Bang on, Rose,” the Doctor said. “In… 2008. Just a few weeks before we met Martha, actually.”

“Hold on.” Martha held up a hand. “Are you telling me there was a giant red lizard roaming the streets of London six weeks ago?”

“Yep.”

“How come I never heard about that, then? Heard about the Christmas star—I’m assuming that was you.”

“Yeah, it was. And if you never heard about the lizard, it must mean we’re successful in containing it and getting it back where it belongs.” The Doctor leapt into action, setting the coordinates for London in March 2008. “All right, here we go!”

Martha and Rose headed for the door as soon as the TARDIS landed. “Ah-ah-ah,” the Doctor said. “Where do you think you’re going?”


“Oh, I remember all right,” the Doctor said grimly. “However, this is one situation we can’t go into unarmed.”

Martha’s jaw dropped. “You’re actually going to give us weapons?” she asked, not sure how she felt about that change.

“Bows and arrows with tranquilliser points,” he confirmed. “I told you the lizard becomes violent during breeding season. The only way we’ll neutralise it and get it back to the TARDIS is if we knock it out. Then we’ll take it to the breeding planet, and hopefully everything will go back to how it should be.”

Tranquillising the lizard was an option Martha could accept, and she waited with Rose while the Doctor ducked into the corridor.

“I know I have bows and arrows in a storage cupboard somewhere,” he said, his voice muffled by distance and a door in between them. A few minutes later he crowed triumphantly and emerged with two bows and a quiver of arrows. “Martha, do you have any archery experience?”

“None,” she said.

“All right then, you take the arrows.” He tossed the quiver to her, slung one bow over his shoulders, and set the other aside. “Rose, you’re in charge of tracking the lizard. Setting 44 on your sonic.”

Rose nodded and withdrew the tool from her pocket. Once they were ready, the Doctor pushed open the door. “Either of you recognise where we are?” he asked.

Martha walked down the alley to the street and looked around, taking in the busy road and the familiar surroundings. “We’re near Paddington Station,” she said. “St. Mary’s Hospital is just across the way there.”

The Doctor beamed. “Excellent! We shouldn’t have a problem getting a cab, so close to the station.
Where exactly is the beastie, Rose?” he asked.

Rose stared at her sonic screwdriver for a moment, then pivoted slowly. “Five miles… to the southeast.”

“Molto bene!” The Doctor bounced lightly on his toes, then jogged towards the front of the station where cabs were waiting. “Come on, what are you waiting for?”

The Doctor tossed the cabbie the fare, plus an extra tenner as thanks for not complaining about the weapons, then he slid out of the cab after Martha and Rose. He gazed up the hill for a moment before Rose tugged on his hand, pulling him in the opposite direction.

They’d barely gone five steps when a woman’s voice calling their names stopped them. “Doctor! Rose!”

They spun around and looked at the blonde woman, who repeated his name one more time as she skidded to a halt in front of him and Rose. “Hello!” He scrutinised her appearance, trying to place her, but came up blank. “Sorry, bit of a rush. There’s a sort of…” He glanced down the bottom of the hill to where Martha was waiting for them. “…Thing happening. Fairly important we stop it.”

She stared at them with wide eyes, a blue folder clutched to her chest. “My God, it’s you. It really is you. And Martha,” she added, shifting her gaze to their friend, coming back up the hill. When none of them said anything in reply, she said, “Oh, you don’t remember me, do you?”

“Look, sorry, we’ve got a bit of a complex life. Things don’t always happen to us in quite the right order. Gets a bit confusing at times, but what can you do?” He smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

Comprehension lit her face. “Oh, my God, of course. You’re a time traveller. It hasn’t happened to you yet. None of it. It’s still in your future.”

A timer to the hatching ticked down in the back of the Doctor’s mind, but he had a feeling this was important. “Rose, you and Martha go on ahead. I’ll catch up in just a minute.”

She nodded, having sensed the same thing.

After they took off down the street, the Doctor turned back to the stranger, who was shaking her head, chagrin on her face. “It was me. Oh, for God’s sake, it was me all along.” She held the folder out in front of her. “You got it all from me.”

He looked down at the folder, then back up at her. “Got what?”

She nodded quickly and cleared her throat. “Okay, listen. One day you’re going to get stuck in 1969.”

The Doctor shrugged; sadly, that sounded exactly like something that would happen to him. She held the folder out, and he took it.

“Make sure you’ve got this with you. You’re going to need it.”

He held the folder in his hands for a moment, curiosity itching at him.

_Doctor, are you coming?_ Rose asked before he could open it up and read through the contents on the spot.
He looked down the street; as much as he wanted to stay and find out more, he couldn’t let them get too far ahead of him. Besides, it didn’t do to learn too much about your own future. *On my way*, he promised.

“Yeah, listen, listen, got to dash,” he said, jerking his head in the direction Rose and Martha had run off. “Things happening. Well, four things. Well, four things and a lizard.”

“Okay.” She nodded, and that calm acceptance definitely gave him the impression that they’d met. “No worries. On you go. See you around some day,” she called after them as they ran down the street.

He spun back around to look at this stranger who’d apparently just given him a lifeline. “What was your name?”

“Sally Sparrow.”

“Good to meet you, Sally Sparrow.”

A scraggly-looking bloke came up beside Sally, and after looking at him appraisingly for a moment, she took his hand. From the way he looked at her, then down at their hand, it was an unexpected, but not unwelcome move.

“Goodbye, Doctor,” she said, then turned and pulled the man into the shop behind them—Sparrow and Nightingale, Antiquarian Books and Rare DVDs.

Shoving the folder into his dimensionally transcendental pockets where it was immediately forgotten, the Doctor spun around and ran after Rose and Martha.
Yes! We're finally to Human Nature! I hope you enjoy reading this as much as I enjoyed writing it.

This is easily the fluffiest portion of the story, after the wedding.

The Doctor pushed the TARDIS doors open and smiled. “See?” he said, stepping back so Rose and Martha could admire the woodland meadow they'd parked in. “The perfect planet for a picnic.”

After two weeks of palace revolutions and natural disasters, the consensus that morning at breakfast had been for a quiet day. Even the Doctor, much as he loved running, was ready to relax, so he’d taken them to Pabaro for a hike, followed by a picnic.

They were only half a mile from the TARDIS when a shudder of unease ran through the Doctor. He held up his hand to indicate to Rose and Martha that they should be still and silent, and he listened.

“Are you sure, Son of Mine? We heard there was only one left.”

“Positive, Mother of Mine. Can’t you smell them?” The sound of sniffing filled the air. “Time Lords.”

The Doctor cursed. Hunters, and they had his scent, and Rose’s. He spun around and pointed back down the path, and the three of them sprinted for the TARDIS.

A moment later, they heard heavy footsteps pounding through the underbrush. “We are close, Father of Mine,” another voice said.

“The scent is getting stronger, Daughter of Mine.”

The Doctor, Rose, and Martha burst out of the woods into the clearing where they’d parked the TARDIS. The Hunters came through behind them, and once the trees were no longer obstructing their view, they withdrew their weapons and began firing.

“Remember we are not shooting to kill,” Father of Mine said. “If we kill the Time Lords, we will not be able to possess them.”

The Doctor didn’t take much comfort in the idea that they weren’t shooting to kill. He reached the door first, wrenched it open, and dove inside. “Get down!” he yelled to Rose and Martha, wincing when an energy blast whizzed over his head and hit the console.

When he heard the door shut, he jumped up and pulled Rose to her feet. “Did they see you?”

She blinked at his sharp tone, but answered right away. “No, they couldn’t have. We were running away before they caught sight of us.”

He nodded, her certainty making him feel marginally better. After taking a deep breath, he spun to look at Martha. “What about you, Martha? Did you see any of their faces? Could they see you?”
“I…” She licked her lips. “I don’t know.”

“Did they see you?” He grabbed her by the shoulders. “Did they see your face?”

“I don’t know.” She blinked rapidly, and her arms trembled beneath his hands. “No, it’s like Rose said.” She took a deep breath and shook her head. “We were too busy running away for them to see anything but our backsides.”

The Doctor raked his hand through his hair, feeling marginally better. They could hide, if they had to. He glanced up at the device hanging from the ceiling, then ran to the console. *Let’s try running away first.*

“Off we go!” he said, taking the TARDIS into the Vortex.

The TARDIS immediately detected their pursuer. She jumped time tracks, but the Hunters followed effortlessly.

The Doctor growled. “They’re following us.”

“How can they do that?” Martha asked incredulously. “You’ve got a time machine.”

“Stolen technology.” The Doctor adjusted the navigation controls, putting the TARDIS on autopilot in the vortex, jumping time tracks. That would buy them time to figure out what to do. “They’ve got a Time Agent’s vortex manipulator. They can follow us wherever we go, right across the universe. They’re never going to stop, unless…” He ran his hand through his hair, staring at the monitor.

Rose looked at the Doctor. There was something he wasn’t saying. “Martha, would you give us a minute, please?” When she was gone, Rose put her hands over the Doctor’s hearts. “What is it?”

“I could stop them now,” he told her. “If we landed, I could easily defeat them—they wouldn’t stand a chance.”

Rose frowned. “You always give them a chance.”

The Doctor took a deep breath and covered Rose’s hands with his own. “There is a way… but it isn’t easy.”

“Let’s do it.”

“I haven’t even told you what it is.”

Rose turned her hands palm up and took his. “Doesn’t matter. When have we ever taken the easy way out?” she asked.

He nodded slowly. “Martha, you can come back in now,” he called out, then bent down to rummage around underneath the console.

Martha returned to the console room a moment later. “What’s going on?” she asked.

The Doctor jumped back up, a smile pasted on his face. “Ah, there you are. Okay, I reckon the two of you would like some sort of explanation.”

Rose sat down on the jump seat and watched him pace in front of the console.

“Those creatures are Hunters. They typically operate in groups of four, calling themselves the Family of Blood. They can sniff out anyone, and Rose and I, well, we’re unique.” His eyes met Rose’s,
asking again if she wanted to go this route, and she nodded. “They can track us down across the whole of time and space.”

Martha leaned against a strut and let out a half-laugh. “And the good news is?”

The smallest smile appeared on the Doctor’s face. “They can smell us, but they haven’t seen us. And their life span’ll be running out, so we hide. Wait for them to die.”

“But they can track us down,” Martha pointed out.

The Doctor ran his hand over his already impossibly messy hair, then looked at their friend. “Not if we camouflage ourselves. The thing is, if we do this, we’ll need you to look out for us.” His eyes bored into Martha’s, and Rose wanted to tell him to ease up, because he was scaring their friend.

“If you do what?” Martha asked. “I’ll help any way I can, but you haven’t actually explained anything.”

The Doctor finally revealed what he’d dug out from underneath the console—two pocket watches, one silver and the other gold. “You need to take these watches, because our lives depend on it. These watches, Martha. These watches are us.”

Martha looked at the watches, then back at the Doctor. “You’re not making any sense at all, Doctor.”

The Doctor dropped the watches in his jacket pocket and flipped the lever that lowered the chameleon arch from the ceiling. “Never thought I’d use this. All the times I’ve wondered.”

Rose circled the console to stand next to him. “What does it do?”

He couldn’t look at her, at either of them. Instead, he kept his eyes fixed on the headset. “Chameleon arch. Rewrites our biology. Literally changes every single cell in our bodies.” He took the gold watch and snapped it into place. “I’m setting it to human.”

Rose made a quiet sound, and he knew she’d connected the dots. He wanted to beg her to change her mind, but he knew she wouldn’t, so instead, he finished getting the device prepared for her.

“Now, the TARDIS will take care of everything. Invent a life story for us, find us a setting and integrate us.” He shot Martha an apologetic smile. “She can’t do the same for you. You’ll just have to improvise. We should have just enough residual awareness to let you in.”

“But, hold on,” Martha said. “If you’re going to rewrite every single cell, isn’t it going to hurt?”

The Doctor looked at Rose soberly. “Oh, yeah. It hurts.”

Rose stepped forward and took his hand. “But we have to do it,” she said again, “because it’s the only way we can give them a chance to give up. Right?”

He nodded. “This species, they’re incredibly short-lived. We’ll land on Earth somewhere, the TARDIS will set us up with a new life, and then after three months, Martha can make sure we open the watches and we’ll be back.”

Rose’s eyes twinkled up at him. “Three months playing domestic on Earth?” she teased. “Are you sure you can handle that—even a human you?”

“Stuck on Earth with you, Rose Tyler?” He grinned down at her. “That’s not so bad.” The familiar banter lightened his mood, and he was smiling as he finished adjusting the headset.
Martha cleared her throat as he stepped away from the device. “So… I don’t want to overstep, but something’s occurred to me.” The Doctor and Rose both turned to look at her. “The day we met, you said Rose couldn’t get pregnant without some… jiggery-pokery. When I found out you’re an alien, I figured it was because of cross-species issues. If you’re both going to be human…”

The Doctor felt his ears turn red, but he nodded. “Quite right. Without knowing ahead of time where the TARDIS will take us, we can’t guarantee birth control will be available.” He looked at Rose. “If I give you an injection after you’ve changed, would that be all right?”

Rose worried her lip between her teeth. “That’s fine, but… If we do land somewhere without birth control, aren’t I going to wonder why I’ve gone three months without my period, and yet I’m not pregnant?” She frowned. “Actually, won’t I think I am?”

He shook his head. “Thirty-first century shot,” he explained. “Targets ovulation without messing with your hormone levels.”

Her face relaxed. “Yeah, okay.”

“Excellent. Thank you for pointing that out, Martha.” The Doctor leaned against the console. “It’ll be a half hour or so before I’m ready. In addition to the contraceptive for Rose, I want to leave you a few notes, Martha—things that might come up, reminders, that sort of thing.”

“Do we have half an hour?” she asked.

“Not a problem,” he assured her. “The TARDIS could jump time tracks like this all day and not get tired.”

“All right. Call me when you’re ready for me.” Martha looked at the chameleon arch one more time, then left the console room.

To the Doctor’s surprise, Rose followed her. “Where are you going?” he asked.

“To pick up our room a little,” she said. “If we’re taking a holiday, I don’t want to come home to three-month-old dirty laundry on the floor.”

oOoOoOoOo

The Doctor heard footsteps on the grating and knew without looking that they belonged to Rose. A cup of tea appeared in his line of vision, and he took it gratefully.

“I thought you could use a super-heated infusion of tannins.”

He could feel the nervous anxiety under her teasing, but he followed her lead and ignored it. “Just the thing for soothing the nerves, as well as healing the synapses,” he agreed. Her determination was unmistakable, but he had to ask anyway. “Rose, are you sure…”

“Yes.” She carded her fingers through his hair and he tilted his head back with a sigh.

“The TARDIS has promised we’ll be married in the lives she arranges for us. Beyond that, I don’t know any details, but I wasn’t going to spend three months without you.”

“Yeah, definitely not.”

The Doctor thought about the rest of the TARDIS’ promise and winced, fairly certain he knew how Rose would react to it. “And to that end, she’s going to provide us with rings.”
He felt Rose’s quick denial as her hand automatically clenched into a fist to keep her ring from being taken from her. “Why can’t we wear our own?”

The Doctor looked at his wedding band, engraved with Circular Gallifreyan. “Well, for one, not being able to read the inscriptions in our own wedding rings would probably confuse our human selves.”

Rose sighed, then slowly pulled her ring off. “I’ll go put them on my vanity and bring Martha with me on my way back,” she said. “Because everything’s ready, isn’t it?”

He swallowed hard. “Yeah.” The Doctor handed her his own ring, then slouched on the jump seat while he waited for her and Martha to return.

He didn’t move, even when he heard them coming. Rose rested her hand on his shoulder, and he looked up at her.

“Let’s do this,” she said, and somehow, she managed a smile.

The Doctor stared at the chameleon arch for a long moment, then he reached for Rose’s hand. “You first, love,” he whispered. She watched him unblinkingly as he hooked her up to the machine, and the trust in her eyes killed him.

*Hey.*

He looked up at her and realised his vision was clouded with tears.

*We’re going to be all right, you and me.*

He blinked the tears away and looked at her smiling face. *Forever?* he asked, gripping her hand hard.

Rose brought his hand to her mouth and kissed his palm. *Forever.*

The Doctor took an unsteady breath, then pulled the headset down and fastened it to her head. *I’ll be there when you wake up,* he told her, and she nodded encouragingly.

Martha watched their silent goodbye, then the Doctor took a step back from his wife and pressed the button with a shaking hand. Rose’s back arched as a current ran through her body, and her screams were horrifying. Martha the friend wanted to close her eyes to shut out the agony on Rose’s face, but Martha the physician watched carefully, though she wasn’t certain what she could do if something went wrong in a situation like this.

As Rose continued to scream, Martha heard a muffled sound from the Doctor and was alarmed to find him swaying on his feet, watching Rose with glassy eyes. His fingers twitched towards the controls more than once, and she knew he wanted to switch it off, to just turn tail and run and forget about this crazy plan. Instead, he clenched his hands into fists so tight she knew his nails must be digging into his palms.

Rose’s body sagged when the current cut off, and the Doctor caught her just before she slumped to the grating. She was still whimpering in her sleep when he unhooked her and gently carried her over to the jump seat.

Martha watched him brush a strand of damp hair from her face. “Why did you ask Rose to go first?” she asked. He looked up at her, and she shrugged. “It’s just… it seems to me that she handles it better when you’re hurt than the other way around.”
He laughed shortly. “Oh yes. Rose has always been braver than I am. However…” He looked over at Martha. “We told you about the bond, remember?”

As soon as he said it, she felt a little dumb for not figuring it out—though in her defence, the idea of a telepathic bond was completely foreign to her. She looked the Doctor over, taking in the light sheen of sweat on his forehead and the hand that was still clenched into a fist. It wasn’t emotional pain she was seeing—he’d felt every sensation that had passed through Rose.

The Doctor nodded when he saw she’d gotten it. “I wasn’t going to make her feel that twice.”

“And are you ready to go through it yourself now?” she asked.

The Doctor shrugged. “Ready or not, I don’t really have a choice. Rose will only be unconscious for an hour, maybe two.” He pulled a hypospray out of his pocket. “But first…” He pressed the device to Rose’s neck and clicked the button that dispensed the contraceptive.

He looked up at Martha. “Now, let me explain what comes next. The TARDIS has prepared suitcases for all of us; they’re waiting in the wardrobe room. There will be a bag for you with instructions for our new life, and any local currency you’ll need to get us there. There will also be period appropriate wedding rings in the same bag. I have no idea what or where we’ll be, so I can’t really give you any more details than that.”

“What about me?” Martha asked. “You said you’d have enough residual awareness to let me in, but what does that mean?”

The Doctor tugged on his ear. “When you find out what life the TARDIS has arranged for us, you can choose how you want to fit into it. Whatever you say, we’ll be conditioned to believe you. I wish I could do more for you, I really do.” He brightened momentarily. “Ah! You can take this,” he offered, handing her the sonic screwdriver. “You know a few of the most useful settings.”

Martha took the tool from him and slipped it into her pocket. When he’d said they’d need her to watch out for them, she hadn’t known he was asking her to basically be their caretaker for three months.

“We’ll need you to get us to our home. You can leave us wherever you want, though the living room or bedroom would raise the fewest questions when we wake up.” He hesitated, and she knew what was coming next. “I know this is going well beyond the call of duty, but if we land somewhere with a vastly different dress code, would you put Rose in a nightgown before leaving?” He ran his hand through his hair. “It isn’t fair, but a man dressing outside the norm is much less likely to draw attention from anyone, including from human me. But if Rose is dressed… well, it wouldn’t do for me to start questioning the truth of our lives on the first day.”

Martha nodded. “Of course I will,” she said, grateful he hadn’t asked her to change him, too.

The Doctor bent over his unconscious wife and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I’ll see you soon, love,” he whispered. Then he pulled down the headset to the chameleon arch and hooked himself up. “Let’s get this over with.”

oOoOoOoOo

“Okay, Doctor, I’ve changed my mind,” Rose shouted as they ran down the stairs. He looked up at her, and she grinned. “That tux is definitely bad luck.”

John Tyler opened his eyes slowly. It took a moment to come out of the dream, but reality returned finally. He was still in his bedroom in Farringham in 1913, not flying around in the Doctor’s
magnificent space ship, saving the Earth time and time again.

The weight on his shoulder shifted, and he nuzzled into his wife’s honey blonde hair. *At least this Doctor is lucky enough to be married to you,* he thought, tightening his hold on Rose’s waist.

Her leg was draped over his, and he ran his free hand over her hip and down as far as he could reach, remembering the scandalously short dress she’d been wearing in his dream. Rose sighed and burrowed closer to him, and he realised he needed to get out of bed now if he was going to make it to the school on time this morning.

Rose grunted when he slipped out from underneath her, and John grinned down at her. She wasn’t awake until she’d had her first cup of tea every morning, so out of necessity, he’d learned to make tea the way she liked it.

He pulled on his dressing gown and made his way to the tiny kitchen. Once water was heating on the hob, he put two slices of bread in the toaster and started bacon frying, then withdrew the pot and tea from the cupboard.

When the tea was steeping, John went back to the bedroom. He bent over his still-sleeping wife and kissed her on the cheek, getting another unintelligible noise out of her.

“Wake up, love,” he told her. “Your tea will be ready in a minute.”

He turned to reach into the wardrobe for his clothes, but he could hear the covers rustling and knew she was stirring. When he turned back around, she was sitting up, blinking at him.

“You said there’s tea waiting?”

John nodded, and she slipped out of bed and pulled her own dressing gown on before shuffling out of the room.

Rose smiled when she saw that John had not only made their tea, he’d started breakfast. He teased her and said it was a self-preservation tactic, given that she had a tendency to burn things in the morning when she was too groggy to pay attention, but she knew several women who hated mornings just as much as she did who still had to cook breakfast.

After drinking some tea and pouring a cup for John, she flipped the sizzling bacon and retrieved the butter from the cabinet just in time for the toast to finish. John swept into the room and snagged his tea from the counter.

“Isn’t this an incredible invention?” he said, popping two more pieces of bread into the toaster. “A self-turning toaster! Even the school kitchen doesn’t have one of these yet—they’re still turning the bread manually.”

Rose grinned affectionately at her husband’s back as he rummaged around looking for the jam. He could talk about anything, and always with so much excitement. She giggled when he crowed triumphantly and whirled towards her with the marmalade in hand.

“Marmalade is good, Rose,” he reminded her.

“Just as long as you don’t eat it with your fingers.” He ducked sheepishly and quickly set the table while she took up the bacon.

The clock on the mantel chimed the quarter hour as they were finishing their breakfast, and John jumped to his feet. “Time for me to go, I’m afraid,” he said.
Rose walked to the door while he put on his coat and collected his satchel. He smiled at her as he approached, and she turned her face up to accept his goodbye kiss.

“You and Martha have a good morning, and I’ll see you for lunch,” he promised, then exited the house.

Their cottage was only a short walk from the school, and John arrived in plenty of time to attend the compulsory morning assembly. It was a little unconventional for a professor not to live at the school with the boys, but the headmaster hadn’t been able to turn away a man with his credentials. However, the man had made it quite clear when John had been hired that even though he wouldn’t be living in the bachelor quarters on the school grounds, he would be expected to join in all school activities. And so he sat on the hard pew at half seven, singing “To Be a Pilgrim” with the rest of the school.

The lecture for the senior boys that morning was on the end of the Napoleonic Wars. As he read aloud from the textbook, he was surprised yet again by how much he loved this—loved teaching, loved focusing on this narrow human vision of history… and where had that thought come from?

John shook his head and continued on, pacing as he read. “The French were all but spent, with only two battalions of the old guard remaining. A final reserve force was charged with protecting Napoleon, but by evening, the advance of the Allied troops had forced them to retreat.”

He kept his eye on the clock and wrapped the lecture up two minutes before class ended, assigning them an essay on the Hundred Days and the Battle of Waterloo. As they left the classroom, he called out to one of the boys. “Mr. Latimer, stay behind a minute, would you?”

The slight blond boy blinked rapidly and his hands fidgeted as he tried to control his obvious fear, although John suspected it wasn’t fear of him as much as it was fear of his classmates, who were already taunting him. “Go on,” he said sternly to the rest of the class. “There won’t be any excuses for being late to your next class this morning.”

They cleared out of the room, leaving him alone with the timid young man. “What did you need, Mr. Tyler?” he asked, shifting from one foot to the other.

“Your essay last week on the Seven Years’ War was very good, Timothy. I was particularly impressed with your comparison of the siege of Madras to Mafeking. I think I have a book in my study that you might be interested in. Would you come by this afternoon—no wait, I’m busy today—tomorrow afternoon to borrow it?” Timothy looked at him hesitantly, and John smiled as benignly as possible.

Finally, he nodded. “Yes—yes sir, I’d like that.”

“Excellent. Now hurry along to your next class. Although, if you are late, I would be willing to write you an excuse.” Timothy shook his head and slipped out of the classroom as the group of second years walked in, and John prepared for his next lecture.

When the students filed into the mess hall for lunch, John slipped out the side door and walked quickly back to the cottage. Most of the professors ate lunch with the students, but none of them had a lovely wife waiting for them at home.

Rose was waiting for him when he walked through the front door, and instead of accepting the little peck she tried to place on his cheek, he wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her close for a proper kiss. Her soft sigh against his lips made him smile, and he pressed two more kisses to her mouth before pulling back.
“What did you and Martha do this morning?” he asked after he took his coat off and laid it over the back of an armchair.

“We made scones to have with tea for the next few days, and then we called on Mrs. Cartwright.”

“Scones?” John sniffed the air, catching the scent of sweet baked goods layered with the aroma of good soup.

“For tea,” she repeated as she ladled soup into bowls.

John looked at her with wide eyes and let his lower lip jut out just a little bit. “But I’m sure you made enough for me to have one now,” he wheedled.

“Maybe.” She shot him a teasing look over her shoulder, then turned back around to cut two generous slices of bread.

oOoOoOoOo

After they finished their scones, Rose leaned against the table in practised nonchalance. John raised his eyebrow, and she knew she hadn’t fooled him.

“Did you realise the village dance is this week, John?” she asked, not bothering to pretend she didn’t have a purpose in mind.

A furrow appeared between his eyebrows. “That’s next week, surely,” he protested.

Rose hid a smile and got up to clear the table. “Today is the tenth, and the dance is on the eleventh,” she reminded her sometimes absent-minded husband. “Martha and I walked through the village this morning on the way back from calling on the Cartwrights, and I saw a flyer hanging on the community board. From the chatter I heard while we were at the butcher’s, it sounds like almost everyone will be there.”

John stood up and pulled her close. “Do you want to go to the dance, Mrs. Tyler?”

His eyes twinkled down at her, and Rose’s breath caught in her throat the way it always did when he turned on the charm. She tamped down the excitement, used to this game they played.

“It might be fun.” She ran her hand down the length of his tie. “I have a new dress you haven’t seen, after all…”

The twinkle darkened into something more seductive, and her heart sped up. “Then we will definitely need to go to the dance,” he said, his low voice making her heart race.

He brushed his lips across hers, and Rose sank her fingers into the thick hair at the nape of his neck. John groaned and sucked her bottom lip into his mouth, but he pulled back entirely too quickly.

“I need to get back to school,” he told her, rubbing his thumb over her lip.

Rose nodded and took a step back. “I’ll have dinner waiting for you when you get home,” she promised.

oOoOoOoOo

Martha’s knees were killing her, and she’d only been scrubbing the floor for twenty minutes. When this was all over and they were back in the TARDIS, she was going to have a talk with that ship about sending them to a time and place when a single girl didn’t have many options besides going
The Doctor walked into the school, a jaunty bounce in his step that Martha knew meant he’d gone home to have lunch with Rose. No matter who he was, it seemed the Doctor would always be crazy in love with Rose Tyler.

“Afternoon, sir,” she said, returning his smile.

“Hello, Martha!” he said. “Thank you for the scones—they were excellent.”

He took the stairs two at a time. Jenny looked at Martha when he was gone, shaking her head. “How is it you work for them as well as the school?”

Martha sat back on her heels. “I don’t actually work for the school. Not really. I’m Mrs. Tyler’s companion, but they don’t have a room for me in that tiny cottage, so in exchange for room and board at the school, I do a few hours’ of housekeeping here every day.”

In truth, that had suited Martha’s needs perfectly. Without some sort of reason to be at the school, she would have had a much harder time keeping an eye on the Doctor.

She rolled her eyes. “And I take Mr. Tyler his tea every afternoon. He tends to forget meals,” she explained, “so Mrs. Tyler asked me if I’d take it to him personally and stay long enough to make sure he actually gets a cuppa and eats something.”

A furrow appeared in Jenny’s brow. “You talk like they’re your friends, not your employers.”

Martha blushed. “They’re just kind to me, that’s all. Not everyone’s that considerate, what with me being—” She pointed at her face.

“A Londoner?” Jenny nudged her with her shoulder.

“Exactly.” Martha stopped scrubbing for a moment and grinned broadly at her friend. “Good old London town.”

Unfortunately, their laughter caught the attention of two senior boys walking by. They stopped and looked down on the maids with a look of haughty disdain.

“Er, now then, you two,” said Jeremy Baines, posh derision dripping from his voice. “You’re not paid to have fun, are you? Put a little backbone into it.”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir,” a subdued Jenny said.

Hutchinson looked at Martha, and she’d seen that look enough times in her life to know what he was going to say. “You there, what’s your name again?”

“Martha, sir. Martha Jones.”

“Tell me then, Jones. With hands like those, how can you tell when something’s clean?” Baines thought that was hilarious, and the two of them walked off laughing together.

“That’s very funny, sir,” Martha muttered to their backs.

“Careful, now,” Jenny tsked. “Don’t answer back.”

Martha held her tongue when they were in earshot, because letting her temper fly wasn’t worth the backlash she’d get. But as soon as they couldn’t hear her… “I’d answer back with my bucket over
his head,” she snapped.

Jenny laughed. “Oh, I wish. Just think, though,” she continued, contemplative. “In a few years time, boys like that’ll be running the country.”

Martha sat back on her heels. She tried to forget the year, tried not to think about what was coming for these boys, but sometimes she couldn’t. “Nineteen-thirteen. They might not.”

Thankfully, by the time they finished the floor, it was time to take the Doctor his tea. Martha joined the other maids in the kitchen, loading trays for the professors while around them the kitchen staff prepared the simpler fare for the boys. The cook huffed when she saw the basket of scones Rose and Martha had made that morning, but Martha didn’t care what the old bat thought about Mrs. Tyler’s insistence on making her husband’s tea herself.

She carried the tray carefully up the servants’ staircase, entering the corridor with the professors’ studies from the opposite end of the main staircase. The Doctor’s door was ajar, as it had been every afternoon since he’d realised how difficult it was to balance a tea tray and knock on a door at the same time.

He was sitting at his desk when she walked in, hunched over a notebook. The glasses he wore as John Tyler were slipping down his nose, and he pushed them up impatiently.

Martha set the tea tray down on the side table, counting the seconds off to herself. Her comment to Jenny about Rose being worried John wouldn’t remember to eat was completely truthful. More afternoons than not, he was so busy when she walked in that he didn’t even notice her until she’d set a cuppa down on the desk in front of him.

Today, the spoons rattled on the tray as she set it down, catching his attention. “Is it time for tea already?” he asked, looking at the clock.

“Yes sir. Three thirty in the afternoon.” She spooned far too much sugar into a cup, added a splash of milk, poured the tea, and brought it around to him.

She nearly dropped the cup when she saw what had kept him so engrossed. The notebook was obviously a journal of some sort, and over the top of some of the ramblings was a sketch of a Dalek.

“Sometimes I have these extraordinary dreams,” he said, and she realised her fixed gaze was drawing attention.

She forced herself to move away from his desk and started dusting the room. “What about, sir?”

“I dream I’m this… adventurer. This daredevil, a madman. The Doctor, I’m called. Rose and I, we travel together.” She looked at him out of the corner of her eye. “And last night I dreamt that you were there, as our companion.”

“A housemaid travelling, sir?” she said, shaking her head. “That’s impossible.”

“I’m a man from another world, though,” John told her, and his cheeky grin was so much like the Doctor that it frightened her.

Martha raised an eyebrow, trying to hide her racing heart. “Well it can’t be true because there’s no such thing.”

*What did the Doctor say about their memories?* She wracked her mind, trying to remember that part of his video.
John picked up his tea and wandered across the room with it in his hand, stopping in front of the mantle. Martha cursed silently when she realised his fingers were resting on the silver fob watch, the one that contained him. *Why did I leave them where he could find them?*

“This thing,” he murmured. “The watch is—” She waited for him to finish the sentence the way he had on the TARDIS, to say that the watch was him, but his voice trailed away, and a moment later he turned around and walked back to his desk.

“Ah, it’s funny how dreams slip away,” he said as he leaned against his desk. “But I do remember one thing; it all took place in the future. In the Year of Our Lord two thousand and eight.” Martha’s fingers clenched around her duster. “I was almost surprised when I looked at the morning paper and discovered it’s Monday, November tenth, nineteen thirteen.”

“That’s right,” Martha agreed. “And you’re completely human, sir. As human as they come. Rose too,” she added for good measure.

John considered his dreams as he took a sip of tea. “That’s me. Completely human,” he said when his mouth was empty. He *was* completely human, and completely happy to be human. That didn’t make the dreams any less fascinating though.

Still, something made him put the journal with the other books he was taking home for the evening. Maybe he could amuse Rose with his stories.

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Rose drained the dirty dishwater while John dried the last dish and folded up the tea towel. “Come sit with me in the living room?” he asked with a soft smile, as if they didn’t sit together every night. She smiled back and untied her apron, hanging it up on the kitchen door before following him over to the couch.

He wrapped his arm around her shoulder when she sat down next to him. She noticed a leather bound journal on the coffee table and picked it up curiously. “What’s this?” she asked, running her fingers over the soft cover.

“Well, that’s… I wanted…” He ran his tongue over his teeth.

Rose raised her eyebrows at his stammering. If there was one thing John could do, it was talk. “John?” She pulled his arm down and took his hand, stroking her thumb over his.

He took a deep breath. “I’ve been… I’ve been having these dreams,” he said. “Almost every night.”

“What kind of dreams?”

“They are quite remarkable tales. I keep imagining that I’m someone else, and that I’m hiding.”

A flicker of unease went through Rose, but she calmly asked, “Hiding? In what way?”

“I have them almost every night.”

Rose frowned; that wasn’t what she’d asked. She opened her mouth to push for an answer to her question, but John kept talking, and she forgot.

He glanced sideways at her. “This is going to sound ridiculous.”

“Tell me.”
John rewarded her interest with a brilliant smile. “I dream, quite often, that I have two hearts.”

Rose put her hand over his heart. “Just one,” she promised him. “I love to listen to it while I fall asleep.” She didn’t tell him she’d dreamt he had two hearts, too.

“Would you like to…” He pointed to the book in her hands. “We could look at it together for a bit, if you like.”

In answer, Rose opened the front cover. “A Journal of Impossible Things,” she read from the front page.

The pages of the book were filled with John’s handwriting and pen and ink illustrations. “I didn’t know you could draw,” she told her husband as she slowly turned the pages.

“Just a bit of sketching,” he answered modestly. “It’s nothing compared to what you can do.”

Rose’s protest of that died on her lips when she saw the creature on the next page. The overgrown pepper pot had haunted her dreams too, with its oft-repeated cry to “Exterminate!”

Her fingers fumbled in her haste to turn the page, and John put his hand over hers. “What’s wrong?”

“That… whatever that is… it just looks so menacing,” she explained.

“Well, they certainly aren’t from my happier dreams,” he agreed, and turned the page for her.

The creatures on the next page didn’t look much friendlier, but they didn’t incite the same visceral fear in Rose. And then she turned the page and saw a face she knew very well.

Rose touched her image with her finger. “I’m in your dreams?”

“Of course you are,” he said. “We travel together across time and space, having all these extraordinary adventures.” He nudged her with his shoulder. “Did you think I’d want to do this without you?”

On the next page, a picture of a blue box made Rose inexplicably homesick. In her head, she heard a man with a Northern accent say, “Time and Relative Dimension in Space,” but she kept quiet.

“Ah, that’s the box,” John said, pointing at it. “The blue box. It’s always there. Like a… like a magic carpet. This funny little box that transports us to faraway places.”

“A bit small for long distance travelling,” Rose said, looking up at him through her eyelashes.

“Oh, well, it’s bigger on the inside,” John explained, just like she’d known he would.

Rose pushed aside her growing unease and focused on John’s journal. Another page was filled with smaller sketches of nine other faces. One in particular jumped out at Rose—she’d seen this man in her dreams, though she hadn’t understood how her dream self could be so in love with a man who wasn’t John.

“I sometimes think how magical life would be if stories like this were true,” John said.

Rose nodded weakly. “If only.”

“But it’s just a dream.” John tugged the book out of her hand and snapped it shut. “I may not be able to give you the stars, Rose Tyler, but tonight is an excellent night for looking at them. We’re right in between two different meteor showers, and if we’re lucky, maybe we’ll see something. Would you
care to take a stroll with me?”

Rose stroked her hand over the cover before standing up. “Of course I would, John. And would you mind if I looked more at your journal tomorrow?”

A shy, pleased smile crossed his face. “You really liked it then?”

“It’s fascinating. I’d love to read the rest.”

“I’m so glad you liked it. I was a little afraid you might think me mad,” he admitted. “Dreaming that I’m an alien from outer space with a ship that can travel in time…”

Rose shook her head. “I’d never think you were mad just because of your dreams, John.” She paused for a beat, then grinned up at him. “Now, for other reasons, perhaps…”

Do you want to walk to the pub for a pint?” Martha asked Jenny when they’d finished their plain supper.

The other woman grinned widely. “Aye, I could do with a drink this evening.”

Martha’s enjoyment of the evening fizzled when she remembered after paying for their drinks that as women, they wouldn’t be allowed to sit inside. She sighed and took the two pints outside to where Jenny waited.

“Ooo, it’s freezing out here,” she said as she set the drinks down on the small table. “Why can’t we have a drink inside the pub?”

“Now don’t be ridiculous,” Jenny chided. “You do get these notions. It’s all very well, those suffragettes, but that’s London. That’s miles away.”

Martha leaned over the table slightly, her body clenched tight against the cold November night. “But don’t you just want to scream sometimes, having to bow and scrape and behave? Don’t you just want to tell them?” she asked, gesturing for emphasis, almost like she was taking the collective sexist world and shaking it by the shoulders.

Jenny looked at her and shook her head, a half-admiring smile on her face. “I don’t know. Things must be different in your country.”

“Yeah, well they are. Thank God I’m not staying,” Martha added, mostly to remind herself.

“You keep saying that.”

Jenny’s smile said she was humouring her, and Martha couldn’t bear to be patronised by another person.

“Just you wait,” she insisted. “One more month and I’m as free as the wind.” A familiar pang of guilt struck her—the thought of leaving her friend behind to a life of servitude didn’t sit well. “I wish you could come with me, Jenny. You’d love it.”

“Where are you going to go?”

“Anywhere. Just look up there.” Martha looked up at the stars, wishing she were back out there. “Imagine you could go all the way out to the stars.”
Jenny giggled. “You don’t half say mad things.”

“That’s where I’m going,” Martha said firmly. “Into the sky, all the way out.”

A flash of light high in the sky cut her off. “Did you see that?”

Jenny sniffed. “See what?”

“Did you see it, though?” Martha stood up. Her heart was racing with fear. That wasn’t a regular astronomical phenomenon, she was sure of it. For the second time in less than 12 hours, she tried to remember the Doctor’s warnings. “Right up there, just for a second.”

“Martha, there’s nothing there.”

Martha slowly sat back down. She’d have to visit the TARDIS tomorrow. If that was a ship, then the Family might have found them.

The ale tasted off, fear making her tastebuds funny. And her fear didn’t diminish when the school matron came running down the road a moment later, looking completely spooked.

She stood up again. “Matron, are you all right?”

The older woman practically skidded to a stop. “Did you see that? There was something in the woods. This light.”

“Martha thought she saw something too,” Jenny said, looking between the two women.

Two more familiar figures appeared on the road, the Doctor and Rose, walking hand in hand as usual. “Anything wrong, ladies?” the Doctor asked. “Far too cold to be standing around in the dark, don’t you—”

“There, there. Look in the sky.” Matron Redfern pointed to a bright light flaming across the night sky.

“Oh, that’s beautiful,” Jenny said.

The Doctor smiled at Rose. “There, you see, love?” he said. “I told you if we took a walk tonight, we’d see some meteorites.” Rose looked at her husband as if he’d arranged the stars for her, not knowing that on more than one occasion, he’d very nearly done just that.

“That’s what that was, by the way ladies,” the Doctor said to the rest of them. “Just rocks falling to the ground, that’s all.”

“It came down in the woods,” the matron said breathlessly.

“No, no, no,” the Doctor corrected. “No, they always look close, when actually they’re miles off. Nothing left but a cinder. Now, would anyone like an escort back to the school?”

“I would,” Nurse Redfern said.

Martha’s gaze was focused on the sky. “No, we’re fine, thanks,” she said absently.

“Then we shall bid you goodnight.” The Doctor and Rose walked back towards the school and their cottage, with Nurse Redfern walking on the other side of Rose.

Martha broke out of her daze long enough to watch them walk away. She had to find out what that
was so she could protect the Doctor and Rose, if need be.

“Jenny, where was that? On the horizon, where the light was headed?”

Jenny looked at the sky, then back at Martha. “That’s by Cooper’s Field.”

Martha took off running down the road. She needed to get to Cooper’s Field so she could satisfy herself that it had been nothing more than a meteorite.

“You can’t just run off,” Jenny yelled after her. “It’s dark. You’ll break a leg.”

Martha heard footsteps following behind her, but she didn’t slow down. Jenny caught up with her when she left the road and started cutting across country, and a few minutes later, they reached the spot where it looked like the meteorite had come down.

“There you are,” an out-of-breath Jenny said. “Nothing there. I told you so.”

Martha looked at the empty field. She couldn’t see anything, but the instincts she’d honed over two months of travelling with the Doctor and Rose told her there was something there. “And that’s Cooper’s Field?”

“As far as the eye can see, and no falling star. Now come on, I’m frozen to the bone, let’s go. As Mr. Tyler says, nothing to see.”

Martha took one last look at the field before turning around to follow Jenny back to the school. The Doctor might not think there was anything there, but he wasn’t exactly the Doctor now, was he? For once, she knew more about the situation than he did. She renewed her resolution to visit the TARDIS when she had a chance the next day.
As soon as John left the next morning, Rose poured another cup of tea and sat down on the sofa, still in her dressing gown. She’d had another dream last night, this time of a golden light that filled her vision and a desperate need to save the Doctor. Her curiosity wouldn’t wait another minute—she had to see more of John’s book.

Last night, they’d really only looked at the pictures. Today, she went more slowly, taking time to read the descriptions of his dreams. Some of the stories weren’t familiar, but the ones that were matched her own dreams in almost every detail.

When she got to the page with her own picture, the words leapt off the page. *Rose Tyler… Filled with the Time Vortex… Bond mate… She promised me forever.*

*Forever.*

The images swirled in her mind, of her and John standing side by side on a red rocky outcropping, with impossible animals soaring overhead. And when he asked how long she was going to stay with him, what could she say except forever?

The term bond mate should have been strange, but somehow, Rose knew exactly what it meant. As close as she and John were, she’d longed for the unique intimacy she shared with the Doctor in her dreams.

“I didn’t expect to see you still in your dressing gown.”

Rose started violently at Martha’s voice. “I didn’t hear you come in!”

Martha raised an eyebrow. “So I gathered. What’s got you so caught up that you didn’t even hear that creaky old door open?”

“John’s been having fantastic dreams, and he’s written some of them down.” Rose closed the journal and held it up. “He left the journal with me this morning, to… keep me entertained.”

A flicker of something crossed Martha’s face, but it was gone before Rose could place it. “Well, there’s no time to read it now,” she said briskly. “I’m sure you’ve got cleaning we need to do.”

Rose shook her head. “Actually, Martha, I wondered if I might speak with you for a moment.”

Again, an emotion came and went across her friend’s beautiful features. “Yeah, if that’s what you want,” she agreed.

“Let me get dressed, and we can sit down in the kitchen with a few of those scones we made yesterday. I hid some so John wouldn’t eat the rest this morning.”

“Do you want more tea?” Martha called after her as she walked to the bedroom.

“That would be lovely, thanks.”

Rose dressed as quickly as possible. For some reason, she had a feeling Martha was reluctant to talk to her, though she couldn’t understand why, and she didn’t want to give her an opportunity to slip away.

But Martha was still in the kitchen when Rose returned, and a fresh pot of tea sat on the table. Rose
reached behind the flour canister for the extra scones and poured tea for both of them before sitting down.

“So, what did you want to talk about?” Martha asked.

Rose took a sip of her tea, considering how to explain what was bothering her. “John’s dreams…”

“He told me a little about them yesterday,” Martha said quickly. “Said he dreamt it was 2008, of all things, and that we all travelled together.”

Rose nodded slowly. “You see, the thing is Martha… I’ve had the same dreams.”

Martha stared at her. “You what?”

“Most of the stories in this book,” she said, resting her hand on it, “have been in my dreams too. Not all of them, but enough to be far more than a coincidence.”

“What else could it be though?” Martha said, fidgeting with the material of her skirt.

Rose stared into space. “Have you ever felt like you forgot something, but you couldn’t pinpoint what it was? And you just went through the day, or the week, with this vague sense that there was something else you were supposed to be doing, or a place you were supposed to be…”

“Of course. That’s happened to everyone, Rose.” Martha laughed and waved a hand through the air. “And then you realise you’ve forgotten someone’s birthday, or an engagement you’d agreed to attend. You make your apologies and you move on.”

Rose shook her head. “This is more than that. This is like… like…” She tried to pin down the thought, but the harder she tried, the more elusive it became.

Finally, she sat back and sighed. “I don’t think I want to clean today,” she said. “I’d rather look through the rest of John’s journal. You can have the morning to yourself—you don’t get enough of those.”

Martha nodded slowly and stood up. When she was halfway to the kitchen door, she turned back and looked at Rose. “Rose, those stories in the book… they’re just dreams. They can’t be real,” she said.

Rose hummed. “Maybe. And maybe they’re some sort of message to both of us, an allegory of something to… I don’t know. But I do know I need to read the rest of this journal.”

oOoOoOoOo

When Martha left the cottage, she walked a short distance down the road before doubling back to take the path that led to the shed the TARDIS had landed in. It was convenient, having it on the same property as the cottage, but now that the Doctor and Rose were both remembering, she was a little worried they’d somehow stumble upon it.

She sighed and pulled the tarp back far enough to get the door open. No point worrying about things she couldn’t change.

The sight of the blue box calmed her, and she pulled her key out from underneath her coat and unlocked the door. “Hello,” she said as she stepped into the dimly lit console room. It didn’t even seem strange to be talking to a machine—the Doctor and Rose had made it clear more than once that the ship was actually alive.
Martha looked up at the chameleon arch, dangling from the ceiling. Sometimes she heard their screams in her dreams. After all, what was a worse nightmare for a doctor than to watch her friends in pain and not be able to do anything to ease their suffering?

The memory haunted her, but after a moment, she managed to shake it off and turn to the console. She switched the monitor on and the TARDIS started playing the video the Doctor had made before he and Rose had changed. There had to be something in here that would tell her what to do.

She listened to the opening list of instructions, taking comfort in seeing the Doctor, the proper Doctor, not John Tyler. “Four, you. Don’t let us abandon you.”

Martha turned a dial that sped the recording up. The Doctor and Rose hadn’t abandoned her, but sometimes, even when she was spending the mornings with Rose or taking John Tyler his tea, it felt like they had. The friends she’d known for two months before this adventure weren’t here.

That didn’t matter right now though. The Doctor had left a list of warnings, of things to look out for, and that was why she was here.

The tape slowed to ordinary speed automatically when the Doctor took a deep breath and pressed his lips into a thin line, and Martha leaned forward to listen.

“Twenty-three. I’ve done everything I could to make sure we wouldn’t be found. The chameleon arch technology should be infallible, but the last time I was with someone who insisted their plans couldn’t fail, I watched the Titanic hit an iceberg.”

Martha rolled her eyes. “Show off,” she muttered.

“First of all, you should know that some memory leakage is normal, especially in dreams. Our memories are only repressed; the watches contain our true personalities and biological code. Repressed memories are likely to slip out, but our human selves should easily dismiss them as nothing but stories.”

She breathed a sigh of relief. It still made her a little uneasy that they were remembering as much as they were, but apparently the Doctor had anticipated that, to an extent.

“As I said, the watches should make it impossible for the Family to track us. However, here are some warnings you should be on the look-out for. First, a ship breaking atmosphere. To humans, this would look something like a meteorite.”

Martha went cold.

“The heat shields burn up as it comes through the atmosphere, causing a streak of light to blaze through the sky.”

He sighed, and the lines around his eyes deepened. “And second, the Family themselves. They can conceal themselves in any body—that’s why they want Rose and I, to live inside our bodies and have the rest of our very long lives. I’ve told you they’re Hunters, and that they can smell us. If you see someone sniffing like a bloodhound in our general vicinity, then you can trust they are on our trail.”

The Doctor paused for a moment, then looked straight into the camera. “Truthfully, the Family is little danger to me—the real me. I could take care of them easily. We’re only hiding because Rose wants to give them a chance to do the right thing.” His eyes hardened. “If they come after us, that chance is over. If you think we’ve been found, Martha, then you know what to do. Open the watches. Everything we are is kept safe in there. Don’t hesitate.”
He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Well, don’t open them unless you’re pretty sure, because once they’re open, then the Family will be able to find us if they haven’t already. But err on the side of caution, because I would rather come back early and find I need to face them than come back to find something had happened to Rose.” He started to move out of the frame, then ducked back in with a smile on his face. “Oh, and thank you.”

Martha stared at the dark monitor. The Doctor’s instructions had given her too much information, and she wasn’t any closer to a solution than she had been when she’d entered the TARDIS. The green light last night could have been a meteorite, or it could have been a ship. She wouldn’t know if the Family had found them until she caught people sniffing around—literally—and that might be too late to do anything.

Finally, she stood up, straightening her spine. “Well, at the very least, I think I should start keeping the watches on me, so I know they’re safe.”

oOoOoOoOo

John tried to mark essays after lunch, but the images from his most recent dream wouldn’t leave him alone. Last night’s dream hadn’t been happy. The Doctor was alone in an empty room, walking away from a high, white wall. Rose was gone, and he would never see her again.

That hadn’t been the end of the dream, but even though Rose had managed to come back to the Doctor, those hours when he’d thought she was lost haunted John. Lying alone in the bed they’d shared, his traumatised mind longing for his mate…

John had never been more grateful to wake up in their tiny cottage. He’d curled his body around Rose’s until his erratic breathing returned to normal, and even then he hadn’t been willing to let her go. Losing Rose was his worst nightmare, and it had hurt just as much in his dream as he dreaded.

A knock at the door interrupted his dark thoughts. He blinked a few times, trying to pull himself out of the nightmare, and then stood to answer the door.

He expected it would be another teacher, or maybe Martha with the tea, so when he saw Timothy Latimer on the other side of the door, he stared at him blankly.

“You told me to come and collect that book, sir,” Timothy reminded him.

John nodded, though he still couldn’t quite remember. “Good lad. Yes.” He remembered then, and turned away from the door, leaving it open so Timothy could follow him inside. “Yes! The Definitive Account of Mafeking by Aitchison Price. Where did I put it? And I wanted a little word,” he said while rummaging through the books on his desk, looking for the volume. “Your marks aren’t quite good enough.”

Timothy stood straight, his hands clasped behind his back. “I’m top ten in my class, sir.”

“You told me to come and collect that book, sir,” Timothy reminded him.

“Now, be honest, Timothy, you should be the very top,” John chided. “You’re a clever boy. You seem to be hiding it.”

For a moment, the missing book distracted him from the conversation with his student. Did I put it away in my little library? “Where is that book?” he muttered as he stepped into the closet-sized room.

“And I know why,” he continued to Tim, as if he hadn’t interrupted the conversation. “Keeping your head low avoids the mockery of your classmates. But no man should hide himself, don’t you think?”
“Yes, sir.”

Timothy’s answer was noncommittal, so John pushed his point while scanning his shelves. “You’re clever. Be proud of it. Use it. Ah! Finally.” John pulled the blue volume down from the top shelf and carried it back out into his study. “Fascinating details about the siege. Really quite remarkable.”

He started to hand Timothy the book, then realised the lad had turned pale. “Are you all right?” he asked, paternal concern overriding his academic enthusiasm.

“Yes, sir. Fine, sir.”

Timothy looked almost scared, and John suspected he was lying. He examined him with a critical eye, but the skittishness he saw warned him not to push. “Right then. Good.” He handed over the book with one last admonishment. “And remember. Use that brain of yours.”

The moment Timothy touched the book, his eyes widened with what was definitely fear. He looked like he could see something that wasn’t there, and whatever it was terrified him.

“You’re really not looking yourself, old chap,” John said. “Anything bothering you?”

“No, sir. Thank you, sir.” Timothy shook his head and hurried out of the room, and the way he stared back at John as he pulled the door shut made it seem like it was John he was afraid of.

John watched him go, more worried about his student’s well-being than he had been about his academic marks earlier.

oOoOoOoOo

Of all John’s duties at the school, shooting practice was his least favourite. He abhorred guns, though he was careful not to let the headmaster see his distaste. There were very few situations he could think of that warranted the use of weapons, and he hated the thought that he was moulding young boys into men who would reach for a gun to protect themselves, instead of their wits.

“Concentrate,” John admonished when a few shots went wide of the mark.

One target dummy was hit repeatedly, however. “Hutchinson, excellent work.”

“Cease fire!”

John turned around to greet the headmaster. “Good day to you, Headmaster.”

“Your crew’s on fine form today, Mr. Tyler.”

“Excuse me, Headmaster,” Hutchinson said snottily. “We could do a lot better. Latimer’s being deliberately shoddy.

“I’m trying my best,” Timothy said, and the defensiveness in his voice reminded John of the impression that he hid how clever he was to avoid attention.

“You need to be better than the best,” the headmaster said bracingly. “Those targets are tribesmen from the dark continent.”

“That’s exactly the problem, sir.” Timothy looked at the headmaster with more boldness than John would have given him credit for. “They only have spears.”

John nodded approvingly at him, but the headmaster wasn’t impressed with the lad’s ethics.
“Oh, dear me,” Mr. Roscastle tutted. “Latimer takes it upon himself to make us realise how wrong we all are. I hope, Latimer, that one day you may have a just and proper war in which to prove yourself. Now, resume firing.”

Timothy turned back towards the targets, all his fight gone. John looked at his slumped posture and wanted to encourage him somehow, but he couldn’t contradict the headmaster—not when he was still standing there, and certainly not in front of the other boys.

Timothy suddenly straightened and wore the same distant look he’d had earlier in John’s study. The gun stopped firing a moment later, drawing Hutchinson’s ire.

“Stoppage. Immediate action. Didn’t I tell you, sir? This stupid boy is useless,” he sneered. “Permission to give Latimer a beating, sir.”

The headmaster shot John a sidelong glance and rocked back on his heels. “It’s your class, Mr. Tyler.”

The implication from the headmaster was clear. Were he in his place, the other man would grant permission for the boys to beat young Timothy.

John struggled under the expectation. It wasn’t uncommon by any means; he’d survived more than one beating when he was in school. But in his mind’s eye, he could see Rose’s disappointed look when he told her about his day. She wouldn’t think there was anything right or commendable about allowing the boys to hit each other—and truthfully, he didn’t think so, either.

“Permission denied,” he said, ignoring the hum of disapproval from the headmaster. “There are better ways to train Latimer.” He looked at the boy, offering him a small smile. “Next time we have shooting practice, I’ll work with you myself.”

Timothy stared up at him, a strange expression on his face… as if John had done the exact opposite of what he’d expected. “Yes sir. Thank you sir,” he stammered.

Someone on John’s other side sniffed loudly, and he turned around to see Baines looming over his shoulder, a strange look on his face. “Anything the matter, Baines?”

“I thought… No, sir. Nothing, sir.” Baines walked away, his gait stiff and unnatural.

“As you were, Mr. Tyler,” the headmaster said and walked away.

John thought it best to remove Tim from the line of fire, as it were. “Time to let some other boys have a go,” he said, and Hutchinson and his team stood up and dusted their knees off. “Ah, Pemberton, Smythe, Wicks, take post.”

As the boys obeyed, John turned around and spotted his wife on the other side of the wall, watching them. He was suddenly very, very glad of the decision he’d just made.

He walked over to her and leaned against the wall. “Hello, Rose Tyler,” he said, loving the way her name sounded on his tongue.

The way her eyes lit up told him she felt the same way. “Hello, my love.” She reached out and ran her fingers through his hair. “I missed you at lunchtime and thought I would come see how your afternoon is going.”

John took her hand and laced his fingers through hers. “Oh, it’s been fairly dull up until now, but it’s starting to look up.”
They stood together quietly for a moment, then Rose said, “You did the right thing, John.”

The proud smile on her face more than made up for any loss of standing he might have suffered. “Not the popular choice,” he said, tilting his head in the direction the headmaster had retreated, “but it was one I could live with.”

“Are you almost done for the afternoon? Would you like to go for a walk in the village?”

“With you, Mrs. Tyler?” John felt the corners of his eyes crinkle as he smiled at her. “I’d love to.”

Martha paced the Doctor’s study. She’d had to wait until he went out for shooting practice to collect the watches, but she’d been looking for almost an hour, and she couldn’t find them anywhere.

“Come on,” she grumbled, lifting a stack of papers off the desk. “What did you do with them?”

Pounding footsteps in the corridor alerted her to the Doctor’s approach, and she moved swiftly to the bookshelf and pulled out her duster, just before he burst through the door.

“Ah! Hello, Martha!” He tossed his mortarboard down on his desk and quickly unzipped his academic robe and draped it over the chair. “I won’t be needing tea today; Rose and I are going for a walk, and then I think we’ll spend what’s left of the afternoon at home before going out to the dance tonight.”

“Very good, sir,” Martha said as he draped a scarf around his neck and put on a hat. “Can I ask before you go, did you take the watches home with you last night?”

He paused at the door with one arm in his coat and blinked. “What watches?”

Somehow, Martha managed to hold in her groan. “The two fob watches you had on the mantel yesterday, Mr. Tyler. I noticed when I was cleaning that they aren’t there anymore.”

The Doctor’s forehead creased into a frown. “I don’t remember any fob watches,” he said, without a trace of uncertainty. “You must be misremembering, Martha.” He gave her a little wave, then darted out of the office.

“Oh, that’s just bloody brilliant.” Martha threw her hands up. “Sure, the perception filter keeps you from opening them too early, but you can’t even remember you own the blasted things? How is that helpful?”

She looked around the office and sighed. “Well, he’ll notice if I rummage through his things any more than I already have. I guess I’ll go to the cottage and hope I find them there. If he doesn’t remember they exist, he could easily have scooped them up and taken them home without realising.”

John bolted down the stairs much faster than would be deemed appropriate for a teacher, eager to reach the outdoors and Rose. When he burst through the doors, he realised that what little sun there’d been earlier in the afternoon had disappeared, but thankfully the clouds weren’t threatening enough to disrupt their plans.

Rose was waiting for him by the gate, and John slipped his hand into hers. Even gloved, it still fit his perfectly.
“I spent most of the morning reading your journal,” she said as they set out.

He looked down at her. “Did you? And what did you think?”

“I think that if dreams are meant to show us things about ourselves that we don’t understand, then you are incredibly brave and kind.” She looked up at him with the tongue-touched smile she reserved for him. “Of course, I already thought that about you.”

“Did you now?” he teased. “Well I guess I’ve got you fooled at least.”

Rose rolled her eyes. “It was kindness that protected that boy this afternoon,” she pointed out.

John hesitated, but he couldn’t let that go without telling the truth. “In part, but I think mostly… I didn’t want to see the disappointment on your face when you heard about it.” He looked down at his wife. “I never want to do something that will make you think less of me. You make me better, Rose.”

“Better with two,” Rose corrected, repeating the words that had shaped their courtship.

John smiled and brought her hand to his lips, then tucked her even closer to his side as a chill November wind swept across the barren fields.

“So, if you spent the morning reading, what did Martha do?”

Rose shrugged. “I let her have the morning to herself. We talked a little over tea and scones, but I couldn’t wait to read the rest of your stories.”

He shot her a sideways glance. “I thought I ate the last of the scones this morning, except what was meant for my tea this afternoon.”

“I may have hidden a few of them,” his wife admitted coyly.

“Hiding things from me? How could you?” John pretended to glare down at her, and she giggled at him. They were in the village now, so John let the temptation to kiss Rose slowly fade away.

They walked across the village green, the grass springy beneath their feet. “You know, watching those boys practice shooting this afternoon reminded me of something from your journal. In one of your stories, you wrote about next year. Nineteen fourteen.”

John immediately knew which story she meant. “That was just a dream.”

Rose shook her head. “All those images of mud and wire. And you said a shadow would fall across the entire world.”

“Well then, we can be thankful it’s not true,” he said firmly. It was bad enough that those images haunted his own dreams; he wouldn’t have them keeping Rose up at night.

He pulled her to a stop and looked down at her, willing her to believe him. “And mankind doesn’t need warfare and bloodshed to prove itself. Everyday life can provide honour and valour.”

Every one of John’s senses sharpened, and he stumbled over his words as he tried to keep up with the messages his brain was receiving.

“Let’s hope that from now on this… this country can find its heroes in smaller places.”

A bicycle bell drew his attention to a tableau forming on the pavement across the street. Directly in
front of him, two men were hoisting a piano up to a first storey window. From their angle, they couldn’t see the rope fraying, but John could.

And then, to his horror, he saw a young woman pushing her baby in a pram reach the corner by the same shop. All at once, he could see not only what was actually happening in the moment, but what would happen, if he didn’t do something. She would turn the corner, unaware of the danger, and the piano would fall on her, killing her baby and likely her as well.

“John, you’ve got to do something!”

“I know,” he said, more short than he normally was with Rose. Time seemed to slow as he looked for a way to save their lives, or maybe his mind was working faster. He glanced down at the young boy next him, who was tossing a cricket ball up and catching it. The rope frayed a bit more and the piano lurched down a few inches.

John grabbed the ball out of the air and threw it at the scaffolding outside the ironmongers. That created a chain reaction that eventually knocked a milk churn into the young woman’s way, stopping her just as the piano crashed to the ground.

Time sped back up to normal, and Rose was staring at him with her mouth wide open. “What?”

“I could… I could see it all happening…”

“You could see it?” John asked. “The piano falling and hitting them?”

Rose nodded. “And I didn’t know what to do. But you, you just grabbed a cricket ball and saved that woman and her baby.”

He shrugged sheepishly. How could he explain to her that for a few moments, it had been like he could see exactly what was going to happen before it did, and what he needed to do to keep it from happening?

They watched for a few more minutes, then continued on through the village, neither of them talking again until they reached the cart track that would take them home by the scenic route, through fields now bathed in sunlight.

Rose tried to hide it, but that brief vision and John’s extraordinary act made her uneasy. On top of their dreams, the strange moment was yet another sign that they were more than a normal couple. But John didn’t know she’d been having the same dreams, and something in her gut told her not to tell him.

“I thought we’d have a cold supper tonight,” she said, wanting to change the subject entirely. “I still need to get ready for the dance this evening.”

“Yes, I’m looking forward to seeing this new dress you mentioned.” John winked at her.

“It’s not exactly new,” Rose demurred. “I just haven’t found a chance to wear it for you yet. I found it tucked away in the bottom of my trunk and asked Martha to press it for me.”

John smiled, then looked past her at something in the field. “That scarecrow’s all skewed.”

Rose kept up with him as he crossed the field. She chuckled when he took the scarecrow’s arm and tied it back to the crosspiece. “Ever the artist. Where did you learn to draw?”

She kicked herself as soon as the question was out of her mouth—she’d been trying to avoid talking
about the journal, and look at what she’d just done.

“Gallifrey,” John said absently, still tugging at the straw man.

The name sounded familiar to Rose, and she tried to place it. “That’s where your family lived before you moved to London, right?”

He nodded. “All of my people were from there. The village burned though, and no one survived. With my parents gone, I’m the only Gallifreyan left.”

The story of John’s painful history had come out in awkward chunks, starting with a quiet negative when her mother had asked if he had any family to invite to the wedding. Every time the topic came up, he revealed something new; she hadn’t known his entire village was lost in the fire.

Rose almost felt like his sadness was her own. “That’s terrible,” she said quietly. She wished it were possible to take that pain and wrap it in love and sympathy, so she could offer more comfort than just words.

The stiff line of his shoulders relaxed a little as he stepped away from the scarecrow. “Well, my work is done. What do you think?”

“Perfect.” Rose gave him the smile she knew he loved so much, and he ducked down for a kiss.

“All sorts of skills today!” he said after he pulled away from her.

When they set back out towards home, she took his arm instead of his hand, relishing the extra closeness.

“Speaking of skills,” he said hesitantly, “you seemed to think my sketches are passable.”

Rose raised an eyebrow at the uncharacteristic display of modesty. “John, they’re marvellous.”

“Then would you allow me to draw you again, from life this time? It doesn’t seem right that the only drawing I have of you is based on my dreams.”

Rose felt her cheeks flush. “Why? I mean… you can see me every day…”

John smiled. “Because you’re beautiful, Rose, and drawing you… I can see you every day, but I don’t usually look at you with an artist’s eye.”

“Well I hope not,” Rose teased. When they were done laughing, she nodded. “If you want, you may draw me.”

“When we get home?”

His eagerness made her blink.

A blush crept up the back of his neck. “I’ve no more duties at the school this afternoon, so unless you have something you were going to do when we get home, we have time.”

“Of course.”

An hour later, Rose was fidgeting on the sofa, regretting her impulsive answer. John was sitting in the arm chair on the other side of the living room, his journal open to a blank page.

“Hold still, love,” John chastised. “It’s hard to get the shading right if you keep moving.”
Rose sighed and went back to her original position. She’d always been on the other side of the canvas. This experience was certainly making her more sympathetic to the friends and family who had let her paint them over the years.

Rationally, Rose knew she was being ridiculous. She’d barely been sitting there for forty-five minutes, which was nothing compared to a portrait sitting. The whole day had made her restless though, and it was hard to sit still.

But finally, John put the pencil down and brushed the paper a few times with his finger. “Are you done?” she asked.

He pressed his tongue against the back of his teeth. “Almost… There!”

Rose leaned forward. “Can I see?”

John crossed the room and sat next to her, with his arm around her shoulders. “Are you sure you’re ready to see this?” He held the book just out of her reach. “I can wait to show you if you’d rather.”

“Open that notebook now, you ridiculous man.”

He flipped the journal open with his finger. Rose took in his drawing of her, her finger touching it involuntarily. His skill was unmistakable, but the way he’d drawn her… Sometimes she was so aware of how much he loved her, it almost hurt.

“John, it’s beautiful,” she whispered.

“Because you’re beautiful,” he told her simply, and he was so close, she could feel the breath from those words against her ear.

The hand on her shoulder tightened, and she turned her face towards him. “So beautiful,” he whispered as he slowly leaned towards her.

Rose exhaled on a sigh when his lips met hers. Kissing John was always a full-body experience, and today was no different. One hand carded through her hair, dislodging the pins and disheveling her curls before holding her at the base of her skull. The other arm wrapped around her waist, pulling her as close as was possible when they were sitting side by side on the sofa.

He sucked her top lip into his mouth, and Rose nibbled on his bottom lip in return. She felt him shiver, and then his tongue traced the seam of her lips, and she willingly parted for him, allowing him entrance for a few minutes before she pulled back for a breath. John’s hand on her waist had dropped down to her hip, and it only took one gentle tug to convince her to move up into his lap.

Rose smiled and draped her arms around John’s neck as his hands settled on her hips. The new position allowed her to lick and nibble at his neck, and he tilted his head back when she grazed her teeth over his Adam’s apple. “Rose,” he groaned.

“Yes, John?” Rose murmured as she trailed kisses along his jawline. His fingers clutched at her back, wrinkling her blouse as she kissed and licked at his lightly stubbled skin until she reached her favourite spot and added some suction.

John hissed when she bit down lightly. “That feels so good, love.” His hands dropped back to her hips and pulled her snug against his body. Rose moaned when his arousal pressed into her, the pressure sending a bolt of pleasure through her. Wanting to taste him again, she slid a hand around the back of his neck and pulled his mouth back to hers.
She felt John’s hot breath against her lips for a brief moment before they kissed, and then his tongue swept into her mouth, gliding against her own. A moment later, his hands shifted around to her front and started unbuttoning her blouse, one hand slipping under the garment to cup her breast as soon as there was room.

Rose pulled back and rested her forehead against John’s shoulder, panting for air. With quick fingers, she got rid of his tie, then tugged at the collar of his shirt so she could lick the join of his neck and shoulder. When he bucked into her harder in response, Rose gave a low moan. “John…”

He caught her earlobe between his teeth and bit down gently before speaking. “Can I take you to bed?” he asked huskily.

“Please,” Rose whispered as she pressed one more kiss to his neck. He tapped her lightly on the hip and she slid off his lap, her face flushing when she saw the naked desire in his eyes. John stood and held out a hand for her, and led her to their room.
After supper, Rose let John change into his best suit first, then made him wait in the lounge while she dressed. “I want you to get the full effect the first time you see the dress,” she told him while she tied his bow tie.

His left eyebrow arched up almost to his hairline. “This dress is sounding more and more impressive.”

Rose winked at him. “You’ll just have to wait and see.”

Alone in their room, she quickly shed her day dress—for the second time that afternoon, she thought, a blush staining her cheeks—and slipped into the formal gown. She’d fallen in love with it the moment she saw it. The short-sleeved bodice and underskirt were made of a rose-coloured silk, but the real eye-catching part of the dress was the butter yellow overskirt. It split over the left leg, allowing the rose colour to peek through. A silk flower at the waist in a darker shade of rose hid were the two sides of the overskirt met. The skirts pooled around her feet in the current fashion, and she practiced walking in them so she wouldn’t trip on her face on the dance floor.

Once dressed, she examined her reflection in the mirror, debating on the hairstyle. She’d left it down during dinner, and it had settled around her shoulders in loose curls. Finally, she pulled it up in a series of twists that left some of the shorter curls loose around her face, and gave the appearance of a crown. Shoes on and handbag gathered, she opened the door as silently as possible, hoping to surprise John when she walked into the room.

He was facing the window when she tiptoed into the room, and she took a moment to admire the way his suit jacket emphasised his broad shoulders.


_Considering I’m human_, her brain added, but she pushed the strange thought aside and smiled at him. “You like it then?” she asked, tracing a finger over the pattern on the overskirt.

He walked towards her slowly, then took her hand and kissed the back of it. “I think, Mrs. Tyler, that I will be dancing with the loveliest woman in the room.”

Rose straightened his bowtie. “We’ll be the most attractive couple then, because there’s no way any of the other men will be half as handsome as you are.”

John gave her a quick kiss, then stepped back. “Let me get your wrap,” he offered, taking the folded shawl from the back of the chair. His fingers brushed the back of her neck when he draped it over her shoulders, and she shivered.

A moment later, he was at her side, holding his arm out. “Shall we?”

The gesture reminded Rose of the early days of their courtship, when he’d been so determined to be the perfect suitor. Some of the things he’d done had been a bit over the top, but she’d loved the fact that he was so anxious to please.
Hopefully tonight he won’t feel like he needs to refrain from kissing me, though.

It was dark outside when Martha returned to the school, empty-handed. After a search of the cottage hadn’t turned up the watches, she’d gone to the TARDIS, hoping against hope that she’d taken them there and forgotten about it somehow.

She raced up the back staircase, brushing past other servants who were finishing up giving the professors their tea and getting ready for their own early dinner. *Maybe I took them to my room?*

Her head was buried in the wardrobe when the door opened. “Hi, Jenny,” she said absently. When her friend didn’t respond, she looked over her shoulder to see if maybe someone else was coming into their room.

Jenny stood in the doorway, staring at her strangely. After a moment, she sniffed deeply, as if she were trying to catch the scent of something.

Martha froze for a bare second, then she forced herself to act like nothing was wrong. “Are you all right?” she asked. Carefully, she slid the sonic screwdriver out from under a stack of jumpers and slipped it into the pocket of her apron.

“I must have a cold coming on.” Jenny finally moved and sat down at the small table.

“That’s too bad,” Martha said as she eased her way towards the door. “I’ll just let you rest, shall I?”

“How did you come to work for the Tylers?” Jenny asked before Martha could slip out.

Martha faked a smile. “They were visiting the place I worked before,” she said. “There was an accident there, and the three of us, we worked together to help as many people as possible. They hired me on the spot.”

“You said you’re leaving soon, to go travelling. Are the Tylers going with you?”

“Listen, Jenny, if you’re not feeling well, I should really leave you alone,” Martha insisted. “I’ll tell you all about the Tylers later, if you like.” She stepped out of the room before Jenny could argue. After closing the door quietly, she took a few steps, then ran for the stairs and down to the courtyard.

*Get the watches,* her mind screamed at her.

An energy bolt struck the flagstones by Martha’s feet as she dashed into the professors’ wing of the building, and her heart raced even faster. She took the stairs two at a time, not caring what she looked like, a maid running up the stairs.

She burst into the Doctor’s study and flipped the light on. This afternoon when she’d looked for the watches, she’d been careful to leave the study fairly undisturbed, but now she threw things on the floor, driven by the awareness that the Family had found them.

Her second search didn’t fare any better than the first, and in lieu of the watches, her next best option was to keep the Doctor and Rose as safe as possible.

She ran out of the study and down the stairs, running into Timothy Latimer on her way out of the building. “Oh, sorry!” she said hurriedly.

“Martha?”
She looked at him over her shoulder as she kept on running. “Not now, Tim. Busy!”

The cottage was dark when she arrived, panting, on the doorstep. The village dance! Martha cursed and caught her breath before taking off again. The Doctor and Rose were in the assembly room, with all those people—people who would be in danger if the Family went after them there. Martha turned on her heel and ran for the road into town.

OoOoOoOo

John could hardly conceive of a more perfect evening. He was walking arm in arm with the woman he adored, who inexplicably loved him in return. They would spend the night dancing in each other’s arms, simply happy to be together.

“Have you given anymore thought to what you’d like to do for the Christmas holidays?” Rose asked as they neared the village.

The loss of Rose’s mother earlier in the year had left them without any family, so this was a conversation that had come up now and again over the last few months. “I thought maybe we could travel,” John suggested this time. “I know Christmas is supposed to be a time to be at home, but…”

“Where would you like to go?”

“Barcelona,” he said automatically. But strangely, the picture that came to him was not of the beautiful Catalan city, but a tropical paradise and a room with a breathtaking view of the sea.

Rose hummed her agreement. “Is it even possible to book a trip like that at such a late date?”

“If you like the idea, I’ll start looking into it next week,” he promised her.

Outside the village hall, an older man held a tin cup. “Spare a penny for the veterans of the Crimea, sir?”

“Yes, of course.” John reached into his pocket and dropped the coins he found in the cup. “There you are.”

The dancing looked to be starting soon, so they quickly set their personal belongings down at a table and took to the floor, just as the master of ceremonies said, “Ladies and gentlemen, please take your partners for a waltz.”

John led Rose around the floor, loving the effortless way she moved. She smiled up at him, the beautiful, teasing smile that meant she had something up her sleeve.

“Do you remember how you asked me to dance, the very first time?” she asked in answer to his raised eyebrow.

He groaned, and a flush crept up the back of his neck. “That was not one of my better moments.”

“I don’t know,” she drawled. “When the gorgeous man who’s just saved your entire neighbourhood walks up to you, holds out his hand, asks you to dance, and then adds, ‘I’ve got the moves, but I wouldn’t want to boast,’ it makes an impression.”

Even two years later, John couldn’t fathom what had made him say something so audacious. “I suppose you did agree to dance with me, even after that ridiculous comment.”

Rose’s fingers played with the hair curling at the nape of his neck. “Well, to be honest, I’d been
John nearly stopped in the middle of the dance floor. “You what?” he said, his voice embarrassingly close to a squeak.

The natural pink in her cheeks deepened a little. “Yeah… I don’t know if you remember, but I was there that day—the day of the accident at the factory. I watched you and Captain Jack get everyone out before the fumes were too dangerous, and then take the chemicals into that abandoned hospital. We could hear the explosion where we waited, down by the river, and until the two of you showed up, we didn’t know if you were safe. You were… incredible, John.”

John gaped down at his Rose. “Well, as long as we’re sharing secrets,” he said, “I saw you that day too. Helping that boy who was looking for his mummy? You were so kind and gentle with him. So I found out your name and then wrangled an introduction that evening so I could dance with you.”

Rose ducked closer to him and hid her blushing face against his chest. John’s arms tightened around her, heedless of the raised eyebrows their embrace was garnering. He bent his head so his lips were nearly touching her ear and whispered, “I fell in love with you the moment you took my hand.”

The hand he held flexed, and he felt her sigh. “So did I.”

John didn’t want the dance to end, but eventually, the music stopped. He smiled down at Rose and said, “If you’ll go to our table, I’ll get refreshments for us.”

“Of course.”

The line at the refreshment table was longer than he expected, and the anxiety building in the back of John’s mind made it impossible for him to be patient. When it was his turn, he took the punch without a thanks and walked back to the table as quickly as was possible in a crowded room.

When he finally returned to Rose, he was surprised to find Martha sitting with her. But he put the look on Rose’s face together with the vague sense of disquiet he felt from her, and he frowned at their friend.

“What have you said to upset Rose?”

Rose put her hand over his. “John, don’t. Martha and I were just discussing something… troubling, that’s all.”

Martha looked at Rose like she expected her to say something more, and when Rose shook her head and looked away, she rolled her eyes. “Look, I really wish I didn’t have to do this, but I do. They’ve found us, and we need to hide. If I knew where the watches were, I could just bring you back—the proper you—but for now, hiding is our only option.”

“Martha, what are you talking about?” John asked, trying to stay calm like Rose wanted. “Watches? The ones you asked about this afternoon? I told you, I never had any watches.”

“No, you only think you don’t, because the Doctor made it so you wouldn’t notice them. It’s called a perception filter.”

“The Doctor?” Irritation flashed through John. She’d interrupted his night with Rose, upset Rose, over a story. “The Doctor doesn’t exist, Martha.”

“Oh, my god! We don’t have time for this.” Martha pulled a long, silver tube out of her pocket. “Do you know what this is? Name it. Go on, name it.”
John reached for it reluctantly. He’d seen this in his dreams; the Doctor and Rose used it to fight aliens and unlock doors. It would work on almost anything, except wood. They’d even used it to heal minor injuries. Could the dreams be real? He looked up at Rose and remembered all the things she’d done with the Doctor in those dreams. Then he remembered how much danger she was always in, and his mind rebelled.

Martha smiled at him. “You’re not John Tyler. You’re called the Doctor. The man in your journal, he’s real. He’s you.” She glanced from him, to Rose, and back again. “You’re not human, either of you. But the Family has found us, and I need you to change back.”

Rose stood up abruptly. “No, it’s all right, I just need the loo,” she told him when he tried to take her hand. She slipped past him towards the hall at the back of the room.

John watched her go, then turned back to Martha, who was looking at him with wide, hopeful eyes. He sighed. “Martha, I can’t be—”

A crash by the door cut off his sentence. “There will be silence!” yelled Mr. Clark, one of the local farmers. Jeremy Baines and one of the maids from the school was with him, and a group of scarecrows hovered menacingly behind them. “All of you! I said, silence!” Mr. Clark repeated, rather unnecessarily since the entire assembly was frozen in mute terror.

“Mr. Clark, what’s going on?” Mr. Chambers asked.

In answer, Mr. Clark turned and shot Mr. Chambers, who just… disintegrated in front of their eyes. The villagers erupted in screams, and a few of the scarecrows scattered around the room.

Rose still hadn’t returned from the loo, and John hoped the sounds coming from the assembly hall would warn her away, though he rather suspected they would rouse her curiosity instead. Please by safe, love, he pleaded, his hands clenched into fists at his side.

Martha grabbed his arm urgently. “Mr. Tyler? Everything I told you, just forget it! Don’t say anything.”

“We asked for silence!” Baines shouted. The screams faded into hushed whimpers, and he said, “Now then, we have a few questions for Mr. Tyler.”

“No, better than that.” A little girl carrying a red balloon pushed her way up to the front of the room to stand with the other three. “The teacher and his wife. They’re the Time Lords. I heard them talking.”

Baines tilted his head and smirked at John. “You took human form.”

“Of course I’m human,” John sputtered, even though a voice in the back of his mind told him he knew better. “I was born human, as were you, Baines. And Jenny, and you, Mr. Clark. What is going on? This is madness.”

“Ooo, and a human brain, too,” Baines cooed. “Simple, thick and dull.”

“But he’s no good like this,” Jenny complained.

Mr. Clark stared at him. “We need the Time Lords.”

“Easily done.” Baines stepped forward and pointed a gun at John, eliciting gasps of horror from the crowd. “Change back.”
John backed away from the lunatic waving a weapon at him. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Change back!” Baines yelled.

John stumbled slightly, gesturing wildly in confusion. “I literally do not know—”

Jenny lunged forward and grabbed Martha in a chokehold, with a gun to her head. “Get off me!” Martha shouted.

“We’ll get your wife later, but she’s your friend, isn’t she?” Jenny said. “Doesn’t this scare you enough to change back?”

It terrified him, especially coupled with the threat to Rose, but he still couldn’t do what they were asking. “I don’t know what you mean!”

Jenny sneered. “Apparently the maid isn’t enough of an incentive. Find Mrs. Tyler.”

There was a scuffle in the back of the room, and then one of the strange scarecrows pushed Rose forward. Mr. Clark grabbed her from them and shoved her at Baines, who caught her and spun her around to face the room.

“As I said, Mr. Tyler. Change. Back.”

Impotent rage boiled in John’s blood. The only way to save Rose was to do the impossible. He looked at her, trying desperately to convey how sorry he was, but she just lifted her chin and looked at him calmly, like she knew he was going to get them out of this somehow. John had always loved how much his wife trusted him, but seeing it today, knowing it might kill her, he hated it.

Baines rolled his eyes and dug his weapon harder into Rose’s neck. “Or you, Mrs. Tyler. Sister of Mine is waiting for a Time Lord consciousness, too.”

Rose looked at him over her shoulder. “You know,” she said scornfully, “you really ought to reconsider your pitch. Even if I knew how to do what you want, the thought of being possessed isn’t likely to persuade me.”

Baines raised his eyebrows. “Oh, you have a feisty wife, Mr. Tyler! But maybe this will convince you.” He twisted Rose’s arm hard behind her back, but she didn’t cry out. “If one of you changes back, we will let the other go. If neither of you do, we will kill you both,” he said, and the evil smirk on his face made John’s skin crawl. “So, who shall it be? Husband, or wife? Your choice.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes... sadly, the sweet, romantic fluff is done. But the trade-off is John Tyler showing shades of Protective!Doctor, so it could be worse.
Chapter 29

The weapon was cold against Rose’s neck, but she didn’t flinch away from it. Another memory flashed through her mind, and she knew this wasn’t the first time she’d had a gun pointed at her while John—the Doctor—was forced to watch.

Rose had the vague notion that she hadn’t truly been in danger the last time, but tonight, she was very aware of what the stakes were. They couldn’t give these people what they wanted. Outside of the fact that she absolutely did not trust them to uphold their promise of letting the other go, it was obvious they were dangerous people with something wicked in mind.

“Make your decision, Mr. and Mrs. Tyler,” Jenny ordered.

John stared at Rose, desperation in the tense line of his jaw. “What you’re asking is impossible,” he growled. “I can’t become something I’m not, not even to save Rose.” He glared at the aliens, but Rose felt there was something missing in his eyes, a banked rage fuelled by the weight of eternity that would make anyone think twice before antagonising him.

“If neither of you will volunteer, then we’ll just have to choose which one of you to kill,” Baines drawled. “Perhaps if a human heart breaks, the Time Lord will emerge.”

The hand holding Rose tightened, and she lifted her chin, refusing to show any fear. She doubted they actually planned to kill her, not if they were so intent on using her body, but if this was how she died, she wouldn’t cower.

Martha shifted, trying to break Jenny’s hold on her, but it was impossible. She stifled an impatient groan—she wanted them to forget she was there, not pay more attention to her.

The look on the Doctor’s face scared her and tripled her guilt. She was supposed to keep them safe, and instead, they were in exactly the situation the Doctor had wanted to avoid in the first place. She tried to imagine telling the proper Doctor that she’d failed and Rose had died, but the possibility didn’t bear thinking about.

A strangely familiar whine filled the room, and the Family whipped their heads around, their sharp eyes seeking the source.

“Time Lord,” a voice whispered.

“It’s him!” Baines exclaimed.

The sound ended as suddenly as it had begun, but the distraction had given Martha a chance to get the gun off Jenny and reverse their positions.

She pointed the gun at the Family. “All right! One more move and I shoot.”

“Oh, the maid is full of fire,” Baines growled. He pushed Rose back to Mr. Clark and aimed his own weapon at Martha.
“And you can shut up!” Martha ordered. She fired at the ceiling, then pointed the weapon back at the aliens holding Rose hostage. “Let her go.”

“Careful, Son of Mine,” the man cautioned. “This is all for you and Daughter of Mine, so that you can live forever.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Martha saw the Doctor shift his weight from one foot to the other. She recognised the look on his face; he was plotting ways to rescue Rose himself. She gritted her teeth, then shoved the weapon into Jenny’s neck, wanting to keep the Family’s attention focused on her.

Baines pointed his own weapon at Martha. “Shoot you down,” he whispered in a voice worthy of a horror movie.

Martha could feel her pulse racing, and she tilted her head back to hide her fear. “Try it. We’ll die together.”

“Would you really pull the trigger?” Baines taunted. “Looks too scared.”

Martha didn’t miss a beat. “Scared and holding a gun. It’s a good combination. Do you want to risk it?”

The weapons pointed at them were lowered, and Rose ran to the Doctor without any prompting from Martha—and thankfully, before he could get close enough to these people for them to take him instead.

Martha didn’t look away from the Family. She’d barely managed to get Rose away from them, and the next step would be equally difficult. “Doctor, get everyone out. There’s a door at the side. It’s over there.” She turned her head enough to look at him, while not losing sight of the Family. “Go on. Do it, Mr. Tyler,” she amended, calling him by his human name. “I mean you.”

He stood in the middle of the room, his body rigid. Martha had the horrible feeling he was considering rushing at the Family without any weapon in hand at all.

It was Rose who took control of the situation. “Do what she said,” she told the people left in the village hall. “Everybody out, now. That means you too, Mr. Jackson. Unless you want to be shot like Mr. Chambers? I didn’t think so.”

Martha finally heard the Doctor’s voice. “Move yourself, boy. Back to the school, quickly.”

“And you.” Martha looked back at him quickly. “Go on. Just shift.”

But he didn’t walk away. “What about you?”

Martha said the one thing she knew would get him out of the building. “Mr. Tyler, I think you should escort your wife to safety, don’t you?”

oOoOoOoOo

Martha’s unsubtle suggestion reminded John of his priorities, and he ran outside where Rose was trying to calm the crowd of terrified villagers cowering on the lawn.

John looked at his wife, then back at the building as he considered what needed to be done. “Mr. Hicks, warn the village. Get everyone out.” The butcher nodded and ran into town.

Tim Latimer was watching from the sidelines, and John took the boy by the shoulders. “Latimer, get
back to the school. Tell the headmaster the village is under attack and we need to call everyone to arms.” Timothy looked like he wanted to say something, but after a moment, he obeyed without a word.

John shoved his hands through his hair and looked back at the village hall, then at Rose. Nothing like this had ever happened to him before, and he had no idea what to do next.

Rose took his hand. “We need to get away from here,” she said urgently.

There was something in her voice that suggested she believed this crazy story about them being some sort of… aliens. John wanted to argue, but he remembered how those monsters had threatened her with a gun, and he nodded curtly. He needed to get her to safety.

They ran hand in hand down the road, and he tried to ignore how familiar that felt. When they reached the drive for the school, his arm jerked, and he turned to look at her, standing by the gate.

“You need to be at the school right now, John. You have a duty to the boys,” she told him when he looked at her inquiringly.

“My first duty is to make sure you’re safe at home,” he countered.

She shook her head sharply. “John, those… those people, they know who we are. Do you really think I’d be safe at our house?”

He opened and shut his mouth a few times, trying to think of an argument against that. “But they know about the school too. Won’t they come after me here?”

Wry humour lit Rose’s eyes. “If I’m going to be targeted by dangerous people with guns, I’d rather not be alone when they find me.”

That was a point he couldn’t refute. “Fine,” he agreed reluctantly. “But I want you to stay in my study, out of danger.”

oOoOoOoOo

Martha heard the Doctor’s footsteps running away, and she pushed Jenny towards the rest of the family and quickly pointed her weapon at Baines. “Don’t try anything. I’m warning you, or Sonny boy gets it.”

“She’s almost brave, this one,” Baines said mockingly.

“I should have taken her form,” Jenny bemoaned. The Family advanced on Martha slowly, and she backed up to keep a safe distance between them. “Much more fun. So much spirit.”

Martha’s hands slipped on the weapon, and she adjusted her hold. “What happened to Jenny? Is she gone?”

“She is consumed.” Jenny’s head tilted unnaturally. “Her body’s mine.”

“You mean she’s dead,” Martha concluded.

“Yes. And she went with precious little dignity. All that screaming.”

A straw hand grabbed Martha from behind, covering her mouth so she couldn’t cry out.

“Get the gun!” Baines ordered.
When the scarecrow reached for it, Martha took advantage of the moment of inattention and ran from the room.

oOoOoOoOo

“Good work, soldier,” Son of Mine said.

The Family stalked towards the door. Outside, humans were still running in fear, and Son of Mine shot randomly after them, enjoying the screams of panic when the energy bolts struck things.

“Run! Ah, this is super. We’ve been in hiding for too long. This is sport.”

Mother of Mine took a deep breath. “I can smell the schoolteacher and his wife. They’ve gone back to the academy.”

“And what do we know about their servant?” Son of Mine asked.

Mother of Mine glowed green while she accessed the memories of her host. “This body has traces of memory. Was once her friend. Martha worked for the Tylers at their cottage.”

Daughter of Mine’s giggle interrupted Mother of Mine. “The Time Lords are married.” She swayed back and forth, her red balloon bobbing in the air. “That is an unexpected advantage.”

“That’s true, Sister of Mine. We can use them against each other.” Son of Mine looked at Mother of Mine and Father of Mine. “Will the Doctor keep his wife safe with him, or will he send her home?”

“We can look for her in both places,” Father of Mine said. “You can get back into the school undetected, Son of Mine. Find the Doctor’s wife, if she’s there.”

“And I will go to the Tylers’ cottage to look for her, and for the Doctor’s TARDIS,” Mother of Mine said. She turned to the scarecrows. “Soldiers!”

Father of Mine looked down at the last member of the Family. “As for you, Daughter of Mine, let’s go to school.”

oOoOoOoOo

Martha caught up with the Doctor and Rose just as he was closing the huge wooden doors to the school. She slipped through, then watched in bewilderment when he grabbed a bell and started ringing it.

She barely stopped herself from grabbing his elbow and yanking the bell out of his hands. “What are you doing?” she demanded instead.

He looked back at her. “Maybe one man can’t fight them, but this school teaches us to stand together. Take arms! Take arms!”

“You can’t do that!” Martha looked to Rose for backup, but her friend shook her head slightly, and she realised the Doctor had told Rose to hide, and she was staying quiet so he didn’t realise she’d disobeyed.

“What do you want me to do, Martha?” the Doctor asked. “Leave these boys unprotected?” He stared at her defiantly and kept ringing the bell. “Take arms! Take arms!”

Hutchinson came running down the stairs. “I say sir, what’s the matter?
“Enemy at the door, Hutchinson. Enemy at the door.” He kept ringing the bell as students flocked towards him. “Take arms!”

Martha looked at the anger on his face and he felt more like a stranger to her than he had in the previous two months. Even the John Tyler she’d gotten to know wouldn’t have been so eager to hand guns to boys and expect them to fight. This was anger over the threat to Rose, and she couldn’t let him act on it.

She and Rose followed the Doctor to the armoury, where boys were already loading shells into magazine rounds. “You can’t do this, Doctor. Mr. Tyler!”

He ignored her, calling out orders to the boys instead, but Martha wouldn’t give up. “They’re just boys. You can’t ask them to fight—they don’t stand a chance!”

The Doctor finally looked at her and noticed Rose standing beside her. His nostrils flared, but he didn’t say anything to her. “They are cadets, Miss Jones. They are trained to defend the King and all his citizens and properties.”

“What in thunder’s name is this?” the headmaster demanded as he strode into the room. The boys all stopped what they were doing and stood up straight. “Before I devise an excellent and endless series of punishments for each and every one of you, could someone explain very simply and immediately exactly what is going on?”

The Doctor walked over to him. “Headmaster, I have to report the school is under attack.”

“Really? Is that so?” the headmaster asked incredulously. “Perhaps you and I should have a word in private.”

“No, I promise you, sir,” the Doctor said earnestly. “Rose and I were in the village, at the dance. It’s Baines, sir. Jeremy Baines and Mr. Clark from Oakham Farm. They’ve gone mad, sir. They’ve got guns. They’ve already murdered people in the village. I saw it happen.”

The headmaster looked to Rose for confirmation. “Mrs. Tyler, is that so?”

She nodded quickly. “Yes, Mr. Roscastle.”

The headmaster’s eyebrows shot up. “Murder on our own soil?”

“I saw it. Yes,” Rose said, her voice firm.

He looked back at the Doctor, the expression on his face less severe. “Perhaps you did well then, Mr. Tyler. What makes you think the danger’s coming here?”

“Well, sir, they said—”

Martha sucked in a breath; she knew enough of the headmaster to know he wouldn’t accept anything close to the real answer. Thankfully, Rose interrupted the Doctor before he could continue.

“Baines threatened John, sir. Said he’d follow him. We don’t know why.”

The Doctor nodded at her, then looked back at the headmaster.

“Very well.” The headmaster started giving orders. “You boys, remain on guard. Mr. Snell, telephone for the police. Mr. Philips, with me. We shall investigate.”

“No!” Martha held up a hand. “But it’s not safe out there.”
The headmaster looked back at the Doctor. “Mr. Tyler, it seems your servant is giving me advice. You will control her, sir.”

Martha watched helplessly as the two teachers left the room. “I’ve got to find those watches,” she muttered.

“What watches?” Rose asked quietly.

The Doctor interrupted before Martha could answer. “Rose, you promised to stay in my study until this was over.” He looked both displeased and desperate. “Please.”

“I’ll go with you, Rose,” Martha offered. She’d already searched through his study twice, but she couldn’t think of another place where the watches might be—and she refused to consider the possibility that they were lost.

Rose nodded submissively, and the tense line of the Doctor’s shoulders relaxed. It amused Martha to realise he was so distracted by what was going on that Rose’s uncharacteristic acquiescence didn’t stir any concern in him, but she’d gladly take advantage of his inattention.

John watched from the window of the armoury as the headmaster and Mr. Philips strode through the front door of the school. Mr. Clark and the young girl with the red balloon stood together in the courtyard, surrounded by some of their scarecrows.

Tension knotted in John’s gut when Roscastle and Philips approached them with ill-advised boldness. “Mr. Clark,” the headmaster said. “I hear you have been wreaking havoc in the village.”

“Good evening, Headmaster,” Mr. Clark said. “Have you come to offer suggestions on where I’ve gone wrong, just like you always used to do whenever you saw me mending the fences in my fields? I’m afraid you have as little expertise in this as you do in fence making, however.”

“Mr. Tyler said there had been deaths,” the headmaster said.

“That’s right, Mr. Roscastle—and they were good deaths, too.” The moonlight glinted off Mr. Clark’s teeth when he smiled. “I suppose you do have some experience in death. How many people did you kill in your war, sir?”

John saw the same evil light in his eyes that he’d noticed when he held a gun to Rose’s temple, but the headmaster didn’t seem to notice.

Mr. Roscastle’s chin jutted out. “I served in the King’s army,” he said quellingly. “I didn’t simply go around killing willy-nilly.” The headmaster pointed to the child. “And I certainly didn’t hold young girls hostage. What is the meaning of this, sir?”

“Let’s all just calm down,” Mr. Philips suggested. He pointed at the scarecrows. “And who are these friends of yours, Clark, in fancy dress?”

Mr. Clark smirked at the deputy headmaster. “Do you like them, Mr. Philips? Son of Mine made them. Look.” He yanked an arm off of one of the scarecrows. “Molecular fringe animation fashioned in the shape of straw men. Our own private army.”

Mr. Philips held his hand out to the girl. “You, child. Come out of the way. Come into the school. You don’t know who’s out there. It’s the Cartwright girl, isn’t it? Come here. Come to me.”
Just like on the village green that afternoon, John could see everything that would happen. This time though, he had no way of stopping it.

“You’re funny,” the little girl said.

Mr. Philips smiled at her. “That’s right. Now take my hand.”

“So funny,” she repeated in a sing-song voice. Then, in the blink of an eye, she pulled her weapon out from behind her back and vaporised Mr. Philips, just like Mr. Chambers had been vaporised at the dance.

The headmaster stared at the spot where Mr. Philips had stood just a moment ago, and he asked in a strained voice, “What is it you want, and why did you teach a young child to kill like that?”

“This is Daughter of Mine,” Mr. Clark said. “As for what we want…” His amusement disappeared and he took an aggressive stance. “Mr. Rocastle, you will send us the Tylers. That’s all we want, sir, John and Rose Tyler and whatever they’ve done with their Time Lord consciousnesses. Then we’d be very happy to leave you alone.”

The headmaster tilted his head. “You speak with someone else’s voice, Mr. Clark. Who might that be?”

“We are the Family of Blood,” Mr. Clark announced.

“Well, I warn you, the school is armed.”

Mr. Clark raised an insolent eyebrow. “I look forward to seeing how well your weapons match against ours, and your little boy soldiers against our army.”

He drew himself up and pointed his weapon at the headmaster. “Now! Run along, Headmaster. Run back to school. And send us the Tylers!”

The headmaster ran for the door, and just as he entered the school, someone called John’s name.

John dropped the curtain and turned around. “What is it, Mr. Snell?”

“I’ve been trying to call for help, as the headmaster instructed, but I can’t get connect to the operator.”

“They’ve cut our phone line,” John realised.

“It would appear so, sir. What would you like me to do now?”

The headmaster entered the room before John could answer. “Mr. Philips has been murdered, Mr. Tyler. Can you tell me why?”

John shook his head and put his hands on his hips. “Honestly, sir, I have no idea. And the telephone line’s been disconnected. We are on our own.”

The headmaster set his jaw. “If we have to make a fight of it, then make a fight we shall. Hutchinson, we’ll build a barricade within the courtyards. Fortify the entrances, build our defences. Gentlemen, in the name of the King, we shall stand against them.”

The boys all agreed eagerly as the headmaster strode out of the room, leaving John staring at a roomful of boys who had just been turned into soldiers. Unwillingly, he joined the preparations for battle, hating the very idea of it but not knowing what else could be done.
“What happened here?” Rose exclaimed when they reached John’s study. He was far from being the
neatest person on the planet, but this disaster of books and papers strewn about the floor definitely
wasn’t the way he’d left his study.

“I’ve already looked for the watches twice,” Martha explained as she opened the desk drawer and
started rummaging through the papers inside. “Though it looks like the Family came through after I
left last time.”

Rose turned a slow circle in the middle of the room, still stunned by the mess. “What exactly are
these watches, Martha?” she asked.

“I know it sounds mad, but when you and the Doctor became human, you took the alien part of
yourselves and stored it inside the watches.” Martha shoved the drawer closed and started sifting
through the papers on the desk. “They’re not really watches; they just look like watches.”

Rose nodded. It sounded mad, like Martha said, but somehow, it also sounded right. “And by alien,
you mean we we come from another world?”

Martha shook her head slightly. “He does, but you were born on Earth. In London, actually. Then
something happened—you’ve never told me what—and you… changed. Most people still think
you’re human, but this Family, they can tell. Because it’s time they want, and that’s what you have,
Rose.”

“You looked into the Time Vortex. Rose, no one’s meant to see that.”

Rose’s dream from the night before returned, and she swayed a little. “Bad Wolf,” she whispered.

Martha gave up on the desk and ducked into John’s closet library. “I’ve never heard that name
before.”

“I am the Bad Wolf, and I create myself… to keep my Doctor safe.”

Martha snorted. “Well, that sounds like the two of you,” she agreed. “Both of you, obsessed with
keeping the other one safe.”

The urgency of the search hit her, and Rose moved to to the couch and pulled up the cushions. “Ever
since John showed me his journal and I realised we were having the same dreams, I’ve been… well,
I guess I’ve been remembering things. Like tonight, at the dance. Martha, this is going to sound like a
crazy question, but have I ever been threatened with a gun before?”

“Yes, you have!” Martha ran to Rose and hugged her. “You’re remembering! Will you help me
convince the Doctor, once we find the watches? Because I have a feeling he’s going to be a harder
nut to crack.”

“Leave John to me.”

Looking at Martha, Rose was struck by the thought that she knew nothing about her—not if
everything in their life was a carefully constructed lie. “So, Martha. If the Doctor and I are married
and we travel together, who are you? Why do you know so much about us?”

“I’m your friend,” she said, and the sincerity eased Rose’s fears. “We met in a hospital on the moon,
and then you asked me to come with you.”
Rose remembered strange rhino-like creatures and a guttural, rhyming language. “Judoon platoon upon the moon.”

Martha’s eyes lit up. “Yes! That’s it. And more than that, I don’t just follow you around. I’m training to be a doctor.” A half-smile teasd the corners of her mouth. “Not an alien doctor, a proper doctor. A doctor of medicine. That’s why I was at the hospital that day.”

“I always felt like you were meant to be more than just a servant.” Rose looked around the study. “We need to convince John,” she said. “Maybe if he believes us, he’ll remember where he put the watches. I don’t think this Family will wait very long for their prize, and I don’t like to think about what they’ll do if they don’t get an answer soon.”

Once the preparations were in place outside of the building, John went back inside to make sure the armoury was managed well. “You’re with Armitage and Thwaites,” he told Pemberton. “They know the drill.”

He frowned when he spotted Rose and Martha coming down the stairs. Martha stood off to the side while Rose came over and took his hand. “Rose, it’s not safe.”

The corners of her mouth turned up in the barest hint of a smile. “Fine evening we’ve had together.”

“Things like this seem to happen to us whenever we try to have a nice evening out.” John furrowed his brows as soon as those words came out of his mouth.

“Where did that thought come from?”

Rose took his other hand and looked at him seriously. “Will you come over here and talk with me for a moment, John?”

There wasn’t time, but John allowed her to pull him away from the main traffic path, into a tiny cupboard beneath the stairs. Martha muttered something about Harry Potter as she closed the door behind them, but John focused on Rose.

Rose looked up at him and the light from the bare bulb cast harsh shadows across her face. “John, those people, they’ll never stop until they get the Time Lords they’re looking for.”

John took her hands again. “Rose, you can’t believe—”

“Even if they’re madmen, they think that’s what they need.” She bit her lip. “You wrote about them in your journal. Don’t you remember?”

John gritted his teeth. Those dreams had come most frequently, about a group of hunters calling themselves the Family of Blood, just like Mr. Clark had told the headmaster. At Rose’s request, the Doctor had hidden them both from the Family, even though letting a threat to Rose go unchallenged hadn’t set well with him.

One of his drawings flashed through his memory—a fob watch on a chain. Martha had talked about watches…

John looked from Martha to Rose. Both women wanted him to change, to become this Doctor. He knew from his dreams that the Doctor would still be married to Rose, still love her as much as John did, but there was something else he knew as well.

He looked over his shoulder at their friend. “Martha, you say all my dreams are really memories—that these things all happened to me.”
She straightened up and clasped her hands tightly in front of herself. “That’s right.”

“Then what about all the times he put Rose in danger?” The white wall from last night’s dream flashed through his mind, but that was far from the only nightmare he’d had about nearly losing Rose. He’d seen Rose climbing from the rubble of 10 Downing Street, Rose held hostage by the metal creature whose picture had frightened her so much the night before, Rose without a face… “Do you know how many times he’d thought he’d lost her? How can you ask me to change back into someone who constantly endangers my love’s life?”

John pulled Rose close. Her hair was falling into her face, and when he brushed it back over her ear, she pressed her cheek against his hand. “I can’t do that, Rose,” he said, his voice hoarse. “I’ll always do whatever it takes to keep you safe—you know that.”

She nodded, then looked at Martha. “Martha, would you mind leaving us alone for a few minutes?”

The door opened and closed behind them, and John knew they were alone. He eyed his wife warily, knowing she’d asked to be alone so she could continue to persuade him to be this Doctor. He braced himself for her arguments, but nothing prepared him for what she said next.

“You’re not the only one who’s had dreams, John.”

John blinked. “What?”

Rose looked at him steadily. “I’ve had dreams too, of a different life in a fantastic ship that’s bigger on the inside.”

“What??” His mouth dropped open; this couldn’t be true.

“I dreamt of walking on an ocean of frozen waves, of red rocks and flying rays, of a waterfall hidden away in a tropical paradise.”

*Woman Wept, Makuyu, Barcelona,* John’s traitorous mind supplied.

“You’ve seen those places too, haven’t you?”

He wanted to lie, but the habit of being truthful with Rose was too ingrained, it seemed. “Yes,” he answered reluctantly.

She ran her knuckles over his face, then cradled his jaw in her hand. “Doesn’t the fact that we’ve seen the same places tell you the dreams are real?”

Rose was only speaking aloud the same conclusion he’d reached, but John wasn’t ready to let go of their life together in their perfect little cottage. “Aren’t we real, Rose?” John took her hand and held it to his heart. “Our marriage, our life here in Farringham, are those lies?”

She slumped a little. “No, of course not. No.”

He pressed his advantage. “But this Doctor sounds like some, some romantic lost prince. Would you rather that? Am I not enough?”

The tears in her eyes made him feel horrible, but at the same time, he needed to know. Did she believe Martha’s story because she wanted the Doctor who could take her to all those places? Was he not truly enough for Rose?

“No, John, that’s not true. Never.”
The conviction behind her answer made him blink, and she smiled sadly. She traced a finger over his eyebrow. “I will always love you, no matter who you are or what you look like.”

Part of John’s brain said that second line should sound odd, but it didn’t. Instead, the promise filled him with a dangerous warmth—dangerous because it made him want to do what she was asking and become this Doctor. Surely it couldn’t be all bad if Rose would always be with him.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked, putting the choice in her hands.

Sounds of a fight entered the cupboard, and Rose flinched. “We need to open those watches, as soon as Martha finds them. In the meantime, let’s focus on getting the boys out to safety.”

“The headmaster has called the school to fight.”

Rose shook her head. “John, they’re children. I know you don’t want them to fight, and we both know the Doctor wouldn’t.”

He nodded slowly. She was right. “I’ll talk to the headmaster.”

“And I’ll get the younger ones rounded up. I’ll meet you outside, behind the trees along the path that goes to the cottage.”

John kept his hand over Rose’s, preventing her from leaving, then he wrapped his other arm around her waist. Rose slid her hand up to his neck and tilted her head back, welcoming the gentle pressure of his lips on hers.

Her hand moved into his hair, and John’s tongue swept into her mouth as he bent her back slightly. Something told him he wouldn’t see his wife again as John Tyler, and he wanted her to remember this version of himself after the Doctor returned.

He pulled out of the kiss after a few moments and brushed his thumb over her lips. “I love you, Rose Tyler,” he pledged, and he took the memory of her smile with him when he went to talk to the headmaster.

oOoOoOoOo

Rose’s lips were still tingling from that last kiss as she walked to the dormitory. It was a goodbye kiss, but she knew this wasn’t actually goodbye. She loved her husband, no matter what he called himself, and they would always be together.

Forever. The word whispered from deep within her memories, and Rose shivered at the promise it hinted at.

The younger boys were huddled together in one room, without anyone watching them. What kind of school cares more about arming boys than protecting them?

Rose took a breath and pushed her anger aside. “Get your coats, boys,” she said briskly. “The school isn’t safe right now; we need to leave.”

They blinked up at her, and she remembered that they didn’t really know her. “I’m Mrs. Tyler,” she told them, “Mr. Tyler asked me to take care of you.”

Still, none of them moved until one crept away from the huddle. “And you’ll take us away from the guns, ma’am?”
Her heart broke. “I will.”

The boys moved quickly then, and she had the one who’d come forward lead the group. “Go to the rear of the school, towards the kitchen,” she told him. “I’ll stay at the back to make sure no one falls behind. We’ve got to get all of you outside, to the footpath that runs behind the school.”

When the last boy trailed into the kitchen, Rose turned around find John. She could still hear fighting, which meant he hadn’t convinced the headmaster yet. Though she doubted her word would sway the pig-headed man, it couldn’t hurt.

Before she reached the main corridor, a hand clamped down on her wrist. Rose looked behind her, and when she saw Baines, she opened her mouth to scream.

“Oh, I don’t think so, Mrs. Tyler,” he said, and covered her mouth with a sickly-sweet smelling cloth.

Rose tried to hold her breath, but Baines was patient, and all too soon she had to fill her lungs with air. Chloroform entered her lungs along with oxygen, and her last thought was that the Family had just made their fatal error.

Chapter End Notes

You can picture me, sitting at my computer rubbing my hands together gleefully. This is why I've been cagey about how Rose would convince John to open the watch. Obviously, there's no heartbreaking scene in the farmhouse where they see a glimpse of the human lives they could have, etc. There is a heartbreaking scene in the farmhouse, but it is totally and completely different.
John’s thoughts were in turmoil as he walked away from Rose. He had loved the idea of the Doctor before, when he’d thought it was just a dream. Now that the dream was encroaching on his reality, he wasn’t sure how he felt about the alien.

He pushed the thought aside and focused on the task Rose had given him. John found the headmaster at the front line of sandbags. “Sir, I need to speak with you.”

“Some other time, Tyler,” he said brusquely. “Perhaps it’s escaped your notice, but we are a little busy right now.”

John looked at the boys holding weapons and crouching behind sandbags, and his lips tightened. “Yes, sir. And that’s exactly what I wanted to talk to you about.”

That got the man’s attention. He glanced at John quickly, then nodded. “Very well. We can step inside for a moment. Hutchinson, I will return shortly, but you know what to do if we are attacked before I get back.”

“Yes sir.” Hutchinson was pasty white, and John knew Rose was right. They couldn’t let these boys stand against an enemy with greater power than they had, not when there was the option to retreat.

He followed the headmaster into the school, and as soon as they were inside, the other man turned and said, “Make it quick, Tyler. There are urgent matters at hand.”

John drew a breath and nodded once. “Sir, do you think it’s a good idea to set our boys against these… things? You saw what their weapon can do. What chance do we have against firepower like that?”

“Are you saying you think we should retreat?”

John shook his head. “I’m saying our first duty to those boys is their well-being, and sending them into a battle they cannot win is the grossest kind of negligence.”

The headmaster’s lips curled into a snarl. “I questioned your decision not to allow young Latimer to be beaten this afternoon, but I didn’t realise it stemmed from such a cowardly heart. We do not fight because we can win; we fight because it is right!”

He spun on his heel and walked back outside, leaving John to watch helplessly as the main gates were pounded from the outside.

“Stand to!” the headmaster called out. “At post!”

The boys all took aim. The pounding grew louder, and the door shook beneath the force.

“Enemy approaching, sir,” one of the boys said.

“Steady,” the headmaster cautioned. “Find the biting point.”

The doors broke down and the scarecrow men John had seen earlier staggered into the courtyard. “Fire!” the headmaster called out.
A barrage of fire echoed through the courtyard, and John watched as one by one, the scarecrows went down. Maybe this wasn’t going to end as badly as he’d feared.

“Cease fire!” the headmaster ordered when the enemy had been vanquished. He walked over to one and looked at it carefully. “They’re straw. Like he said, straw.”

“Then no one’s dead, sir? We killed no one?”

Hutchinson’s question made John’s heart ache. No boy of seventeen should carry the burden of taking another life, and even though it turned out that hadn’t happened, John knew these boys would never forget those few moments when they thought they had killed.

Footsteps crunching in the gravel caught everyone’s attention. “Stand to!” the headmaster commanded.

The young girl with a balloon skipped into the courtyard. John took an instinctive step back, remembering the cold way she had killed Mr. Philips.

But the headmaster relaxed and gestured for her to come closer. “You, child. Come out of the way. Come into the school. You did something wrong before, but if you will turn yourself in now, the magistrates will be lenient with you.” The child stopped into the middle of the courtyard, and the headmaster walked towards her. “It’s the Cartwright girl, isn’t it? Come here. Come to me.”

John couldn’t imagine what the headmaster was thinking, but before he could protest, Martha ran past him. “Mr. Rocastle! Please, don’t go near her.”

The headmaster glared at her. “You were told to be quiet.”

“Just listen to me,” Martha pleaded. “She’s part of it. Mr. Tyler, tell him.”

John nodded. “Martha is right, sir. She was with Baines in the village. And you saw her kill Mr. Philips not thirty minutes ago.”

“Mr. Tyler, your cowardice continues to amaze me. Do you not know that there are many ways a child could be coerced into acting in such a manner? I will not have her listed among the casualties of this night.” He looked back at the girl. “Come with me.”

“Humans are so dull and stupid,” she said. Before anyone could blink, she pulled a gun out from behind her back and shot the headmaster. “Now who’s going to shoot me?” she taunted, looking at the boys. “Any of you, really?”

“Put down your guns,” John ordered.

“But sir, the Headmaster,” Hutchinson protested.

“I’ll not see this happen. Not anymore.” Mr. Clark stepped quietly into the courtyard, and John was even more determined to get the boys out. “You will retreat in an orderly fashion back through the school. Hutchinson, lead the way.”

“But sir.”

John glanced at him, then back at Mr. Clark. “I said, lead the way.”

“Well, go on, then. Run!” Mr. Clark fired his weapon into the air.

That galvanised the boys into action, and they ran back into the school. Mr. Clark ordered the
scarecrows to reanimate, and they rose from the flagstones, chasing the boys.

It wasn’t the orderly retreat John had hoped for, and he feared the chaos might lead to injuries that could have been avoided. He tried to corral as many as he could towards the stable block, where he found Martha and the matron directing them to hide in the fields.

Anxiety buzzed in the back of John’s mind, but he ignored it as best he could. “Let’s go,” he told the boys. “Quick as you can.”

“Where’s Rose?” Martha asked.

The same anxiety bothered him again, but John said, “She was getting the younger boys out. Now you, ladies,” he said, pointing to the door.

Matron Redfern shook her head. “Not till we’ve got the boys out.”

A group of senior boys ran past them, looking more terrified than anyone he’d seen that night. John followed them outside, watching the boys as they ran.

Martha and Matron Redfern were in the doorway when he ran back into the stable. “Now, I insist. You’ll find Rose with the younger boys on the path to our cottage. If there are any more boys inside, I’ll find them.”

John opened the door, intending to go back into the school, but when he saw scarecrows on the other side, he slammed it shut and locked it instead. He spun on his heel and noted with some relief that the matron was gone, leaving only Martha behind. If his memories were all true, then she was used to running with him from danger.

“I think, retreat,” he said, and the two of them ran.

John led them towards the cottage, shivering when the wind cut through his wool suit jacket. As they crept through the woods, Mr. Clark’s voice called out to them. “Doctor! Doctor!”

The side entrance to the school was visible through a gap in the trees, and John could see a blue box standing in front of the door. He sucked in a breath at the sight, his mind suddenly filled with memories of running towards her, hand in hand with Rose.

“Come back, Doctor,” Mr. Clark taunted. “Come home. Come and claim your prize.”

“You recognise it, don’t you?” Martha whispered.

Jenny called out, “Come out, Doctor. Come to us!”

John shook his head reflexively. Most of his doubts had withered away when Rose revealed that they’d shared the same dreams, but it was still hard to believe the fantastical truth.

“Do you remember its name?” Martha pressed.

All thoughts of the Doctor’s blue box disappeared from John’s mind when Baines stepped out of the shadows to join his Family, holding—

“Rose!” John gasped, the agony lancing through him stealing the volume from the cry. The anxiety he’d felt made sense now.

“Out you come, Doctor,” Baines said. “There’s a good boy. Come to the Family.”
“Time to end it now, Doctor,” Jenny said. “We have your wife. If you don’t turn yourself over to us in one hour, she will die.”

The pain solidified into icy rage. John half stood up, but Martha grabbed his hand and yanked him back down to the ground.

“Let go of me,” he ordered, hardly recognising his voice.

Martha scoffed at that. “And let you go off to get yourself and Rose both killed? We need a plan.” She paused, shook her head, and said, “We need the watches.”

They watched as the Family walked away with Rose, leaving their scarecrow army behind to guard the TARDIS.

“Where are they taking her?”

“Probably to their ship,” Martha said. “Standing there is too exposed. Even a human could attack, if armed properly.”

John paced the width of the path. “Okay, so we find their ship and rescue Rose.”

“That is not a plan.” Martha argued. “God, you’re rubbish when Rose is in danger.” She felt a hint of remorse when he flinched at that, but if he didn’t pull himself together, she could end up stuck in 1913.

“Right, yes, fine, we need a plan.” John shoved his hand through his hair. “But we don’t have a plan, and if I can’t come up with something in an hour, they’ll kill Rose.”

“I’m not going to let that happen. You and Rose are my best friends.” Martha grabbed his hand and tugged him towards the open fields. “We need a place to hide while we figure out what to do, and I think I know where we can go.”

They jogged together through the fields and bracken until they came to a dark farmhouse. “What’s this? Who lives here?”

“If I’m right, no one,” Martha said grimly as she opened the door. The house was silent and dark, with tea laid out on the table, half-eaten.

“Sometimes, I hate being right.” Martha sighed and shook her head. “This is the Cartwrights’ house. Rose and I called on Mrs. Cartwright yesterday. That little girl at the school, she’s their daughter. If she came home this afternoon, and her parents tried to stop her…”

John sank onto the bench underneath the window and held his head in his hands. “Rose can’t die,” he whimpered. “I can’t… not without Rose.”

Martha watched her friend with more than a little trepidation. He and Rose had told her their bond was permanent, and that tampering with it hurt. She’d assumed becoming human had changed that, but what if it hadn’t?

“Mr. Tyler,” she said hesitantly, “have you ever thought you could feel Rose in your head? Like, you just knew where she was, or how she was feeling?”

He looked at Martha, then leaned his head back against the window. “All the time.”

Martha wanted to swear at that revelation, but before she could shock John Tyler’s 1913 sensibilities,
someone knocked on the door.

She stared at the door for a moment, then said, “Right. Scarecrows don’t knock.” Still, she was relieved when she opened the door to find Timothy Latimer on the other side.

“What are you doing here, Tim?” John asked.

The boy held out two watches. “I brought you these.”

John leapt up and snatched them out of his hand. “How did you get these?” he snapped.

“When I came to borrow that book this afternoon,” Tim said. “They talked to me, asked me to keep them safe. They told me you were here; that’s how I found you.”

As John held the watches, he thought he heard voices coming from them, his voice and Rose’s voice, telling him it was time, to trust Tim, to save Rose.

“Why did they speak to me?” Tim asked, interrupting John’s thoughts.

“Oh, low level telepathic field. You were born with it. Just an extra synaptic engram causing—” He looked up at Martha, wide-eyed. “Is that how he talks?”

She nodded eagerly. “That’s him. All you have to do is open it and he’s back.”

John stared at the silver watch, whispering in his voice. “And he can save Rose?”

Tim answered before Martha could. “The Doctor would die before he let anything happen to Rose Tyler.”

“All right then.” John put his thumb on the latch, and after only a second’s hesitation, he pushed it and the watch flipped open.

Golden light flooded the room, but John hardly saw it. Memories were pouring into his mind, memories of who he was and his 1200 years of life. He winced at the discomfort when his biology reverted back to that of a Time Lord, but thankfully it wasn’t nearly as painful a process as becoming human had been.

Only one thing didn’t go back to exactly as it had been before he’d changed. His bond with Rose was weaker now than it had been when they were only engaged, because her fully human mind wasn’t able to sustain anything more than an empathic link.

The watch snapped shut when his transformation was complete. “Doctor?” Martha asked.

“That’s me,” he answered.

“Doctor, they’ve got Rose.”

“I remember,” he answered curtly, the Oncoming Storm creeping into his voice. He’d given the Family a chance, and they’d chosen to take his bond mate hostage.

“What are you going to do?”

The Doctor held up his watch. “A bit of trickery to get close, and then, rescue Rose and take care of the Family.”

He looked down at the gold watch containing Rose. Now that he was himself again, he could
understand the words she was saying, urging him to be merciful. He gritted his teeth. Sometimes, Rose asked for too much.

“Do you hear her, Doctor?” Tim asked, and the Doctor looked up at him, his eyebrows knit together. “The Wolf is howling for her mate.”

A shiver ran up the Doctor’s spine. “I always hear her, Tim,” he replied. “Thank you for taking care of the watches, and bringing them to me. Now you should go join the Matron and the other boys.”

The lad nodded and left the cottage, and the Doctor turned his attention to Martha. “Martha, will you come with me? I’ll need to deal with the Family immediately, and I don’t know what state Rose will be in. If you were there waiting to take care of her if she needs it…”

“Of course, Doctor.”

He held the watch out to her. “And take this, too. Once we’re out of the ship, have Rose open the watch and then both of you come back here. I’ll come for you after the Family have been taken care of.”

The Doctor opened the door to the Family’s ship with the sonic screwdriver, then put it in his pocket and stumbled inside. The eerie green lighting reminded him of Rose’s joke when they were looking for the Racnoss about the bad guys using mood lighting. He scanned the dark interior quickly, looking for Rose and taking in the situation. All four members of the Family were on the far end of the ship by the guns, and slumped on the floor in front of them was Rose.

Even in the dim light, he could see faint bruising around her mouth and nose from where Baines had grabbed her. His fury mounted higher, but he forced it down and put on the persona of a desperate husband instead—which wasn’t much of an act. “Just…” He stumbled purposely against the controls on the wall. “Just give me my wife back. That’s all I’m asking. I’ll do anything you want, just… just don’t hurt her.”

The Family stared at him as he stood straight before them, eyes wide and his chest heaving with supposedly panicked breaths.

“Say please,” Son of Mine ordered cruelly.

The Doctor paused, then took another breath. “Please.”

Mother of Mine looked him up and down. “Wait a minute.” She took a deep breath. “Still human.”

“Now I can’t, I can’t pretend to understand,” the Doctor stammered as he took a step towards the Family, “not for a second, but I want you to know I’m innocent in all this.” He put his hand over his chest in appeal. “He made me John Tyler. It’s not like I had any control over it.” He flung out his hand to emphasise that statement, then ran it over another set of controls.

“He didn’t just make himself human,” Mother of Mine said derisively. “He made himself an idiot.”

The Doctor looked at them, all of them staring at him.

“Same thing, isn’t it?” Son of Mine sneered.

“I don’t care about this Doctor and your family,” the Doctor said as he took a few more steps towards Rose. “I just want you to go and leave Rose and I alone. So I’ve made my choice.” He held
the watch in his outstretched hand, and their gazes sharpened. “You can have him. Just take it, please! Take him away.”

Son of Mine walked towards him. “At last.” He took the watch and stared at it for a minute, then without looking away from it, he grabbed the Doctor by the lapels. “Don’t think that saved you, or your precious wife.”

He shoved the Doctor away, and the Doctor used the momentum to press more controls as he fell to the ground next to Rose. She shifted a little and groaned softly, and the tightness in his chest loosened at the signs she was waking up. He reached for her hand and gave it a quick squeeze, then subtly moved into a crouch.

“Family of Mine,” Son of Mine said, his voice low and triumphant, “now we shall have the lives of a Time Lord.”

He flipped open the watch and they all sniffed deeply, realising almost immediately that it no longer contained the Doctor’s consciousness.

Son of Mine clicked the watch shut and glared at the Doctor. “It’s empty!”

The Doctor stared at it, panting heavily. “Where’s it gone?”

Son of Mine threw it back at the Doctor. “You tell me.”

The Doctor snatched it out of the air with reflexes far superior to John Tyler’s, then he pulled Rose to him and stood up. “Oh, I think the explanation might be you’ve been fooled by a simple olfactory misdirection. Little bit like ventriloquism of the nose. It’s an elementary trick in certain parts of the galaxy.

“But it has got to be said—” the Doctor nodded at the control panel—“I don’t like the looks of that hydroconometer.” The Family followed his gaze as he looked at the ceiling and finally the heat converters. “It seems to be indicating you’ve got energy feedback all the way through the retrostabilisers feeding back into the primary heat converters.” Comprehension slowly dawned on their faces, and he felt a surge of vengeful glee. “Oh. Because if there’s one thing you shouldn’t have done, you shouldn’t have let me press all those buttons.” He spun closer to the door. “But, in fairness, I will give you one word of advice. Run.”

The Doctor raced out of the ship, cradling a groggy Rose in his arms. Behind him, the Family shouted as they ran from their about-to-explode ship, but he ignored them, running to where Martha stood by the fence.

“Rose, can you stand?” he asked gently. She nodded, and he lowered her to her feet. Martha wrapped an arm around Rose’s waist and led her away, and the Doctor turned back to the Family just as the explosion from their ship knocked them off their feet.

They groaned and slowly looked up at the Doctor, fear finally showing in their eyes. He stared at them, one by one, letting them see the full force of his anger.

“There’s one other thing you shouldn’t have done,” he told him, his voice hard now instead of conversational as it had been on the ship. “You should not have threatened Rose. Because now, while I’m considering what to do with you, I’m remembering my wife lying unconscious on the floor of your ship.”

The Doctor sucked in a breath when the bond flared back to full strength. Rose was fully herself again.
He rocked back on his heels. “Even worse for you, it was Rose who urged me to hide instead of confronting you right away, two months ago. So you abused the generosity of the one person who might have asked me to show you mercy. And I find that doesn’t make me feel very merciful at all.”

The Family remained on their bellies in the dirt, and the Doctor leaned over them. “Tell me, Son of Mine, why did you hunt for us in the first place?”

Fear finally shone in Baines’ eyes. “To take possession of your Time Lord consciousnesses. To live forever without having to find a new body every three months.”

“Yes, to live forever.” The Doctor straightened up. Rose was no longer telling him to show mercy, but perhaps granting their wish would be a worse punishment than death. *Poetic justice.* “Well, as it happens, I am feeling merciful, after all. I think you should get exactly what you wanted—eternal life. Get up,” he ordered, and the Family stumbled to their feet, cowering in fear.

He drove them towards the TARDIS and shoved them inside. The punishments he devised for them were simple and elegant. Father of Mine was wrapped in unbreakable chains that had been forged in the heart of a dwarf star, and Mother of Mine was ejected from the TARDIS into the event horizon of a collapsing galaxy. Daughter of Mine was trapped in mirrors—in every mirror—always able to see out, but never able to get out.

And Son of Mine, the one who had taken Rose?

The Doctor stared at this last member of the Family, after he had wrought justice on the other three. Jeremy Baines’ face stared back at him, but the eyes no longer held the arrogance of the young man who’d had life handed to him on a silver platter, or the vicious cruelty of Son of Mine. All the Doctor saw was fear.

“Something special for you,” he murmured. “You were so eager to destroy, so I think you will spend the rest of time protecting.”

It was simple work, really, to suspend him in time. The Doctor landed the TARDIS in the field he and Rose had walked through just that afternoon and dragged Son of Mine to the scarecrow. With the body unable to move, the Doctor could dress him in the scarecrow’s trappings, then tie him to the bars.

He stared at Baines’ face one more time, the anger burning hot. Then he pulled the burlap bag over his head, and walked away.

Rose paced the Cartwright house, waiting for the Doctor to return from issuing judgment on the Family of Blood. She’d known as soon as she’d opened the watch that he would not be swayed, and for once, she didn’t try to argue. The Family had threatened her life and actually managed to hurt her, and for the Doctor, that was the one transgression he could never forgive.

“Then what about all the times he put Rose in danger? Do you know how many times he thought he’d lost her? How can you ask me to change back into someone who constantly endangers my love’s life?”

The Doctor’s guilt had always been one of the darker threads running through the tapestry of their relationship, but hearing a version of the Doctor state so unequivocally that he only risked her life…

The rustle of Martha’s skirt as she shifted in her seat drew Rose from her private thoughts. “I know this isn’t the way we wanted things to go,” she said, “but I have to tell you, I’m glad I don’t have to
spend another month in 1913. I’m ready to just spend a week enjoying everything about modern life that I take for granted. Like the bathtub in my en suite, for instance, and the never ending supply of hot water.”

“Oh, I can’t argue with that.” Rose sighed in pleasure at the thought.

“Spending the day in front of the telly, just catching up on all the shows we’ve missed.”

“Ice cream whenever I want it.”

“Being treated like an actual person when we go out.”

Rose sobered. “I’m sorry about that, Martha. I don’t know why the TARDIS chose this time and this place. I’m sure she had a reason, but that doesn’t mean the experience was any more pleasant for you.”

Martha shrugged. “It wasn’t as bad as it could have been. You and the Doctor accepted me as your friend and never talked down to me, even though I worked for you.” She relaxed into the settee. “You know, I figured the colour of my skin would be the hardest part about being stuck in 1913, but being a woman was at least as bad.”

Rose wrinkled her nose. “Yeah, I’ve gotten my share of that across time and space—can’t imagine what it would be like to have more prejudice heaped on top of that.”

The TARDIS engines echoed through the room, and Rose’s head snapped up. A moment later, the door opened and her bond mate stepped inside. He wore the same half-hopeful, half-proud expression he’d had the first time she’d seen him in his brown suit, and just like that Christmas, her breath caught at the figure he cut in his pinstripes and brown coat. She had missed this him, even if she’d thought he was only a character in her dreams.

Rose smiled back at him, and a second later he strode across the room and swept her up into his arms. She pressed her nose against his collar, and she fancied she could smell the trace of Time the Family had used to track them. The comforting rhythm of his dual heartbeats pounded against her ear, and she was home.

After holding each other tight for a moment, the Doctor stepped back and took her hand. “The TARDIS is right outside. Let’s go home.”

Rose pulled him to the side of the room. “Let’s let Martha go first,” she told him.

He looked over at their friend for the first time, and his eyes softened. “Of course. Thank you, Martha. Thank you for everything.”

Martha hugged them both, then ran into the TARDIS.

Rose would have smiled at her enthusiasm, but then she stepped into the TARDIS herself and felt the warm hum of the ship envelope her.

Oh. Oh, I missed you too, Dear.

She stroked a bit of the coral, then realised the Doctor was watching her, a glint of amusement in his eyes. I hope she’s not the only one you missed.

Rose took his hand and walked with him down the corridor to their room. I did miss you, and I didn’t even know it, she told him. But that reminds me, sometimes I thought I could tell what John
was feeling.

Not even the chameleon arch can completely break a bond. The Doctor pushed the door open. I was always aware of you, always somehow aware of where you were, or how you were feeling.

Their telepathic conversation only served to whet Rose’s desire for more. The human Rose hadn’t understood the longing she’d felt for more intimacy with her husband, but now that she was herself again, she ached for the full telepathic connection. She felt the same need in the Doctor, and without a word, they quickly changed into pyjamas and went into the study.

On her way out of their bedroom, Rose spotted something on her vanity and picked it up as she walked by. When she sat down with the Doctor on the couch, she opened her clenched fist and showed him what she held.

The Doctor’s mouth stretched into a wide smile when he saw their rings. He picked hers up first and took her left hand. “I do like the rings the TARDIS provided for us,” he said as he slid the old-fashioned diamond ring off her finger. “But I like the ones we chose better.”

His gaze burned into hers when he pushed her wedding ring back onto her finger where it belonged. Rose Tyler, you are my forever.

Without a word, Rose removed the simple silver band John Tyler had worn and replaced it with the Doctor’s Gallifreyan-engraved ring. Forever, my Doctor, she promised, rubbing her thumb over the circular script as she repeated her promise.

The Doctor pulled her to him and they stretched out together on the couch. They both reached for the full communion of their bond at the same moment, exhaling when they were finally as close as it was possible to be.

Rose sighed and shifted closer when she was surrounded by the feeling of home that was the Doctor’s telepathic presence. She felt tension ease out of his shoulders when she wrapped her own mind around him, and could see the pink and gold of her mental signature through his eyes.

Then she let go of conscious thought and simply rested in the absolute security of their bond. The complete confidence in his love for her, and knowing he could feel the same reflected back, eased the loneliness she’d experienced for the last two months.

When they pulled themselves out of their telepathic embrace some time later, the TARDIS had tea and biscuits waiting, and Rose smiled at the simple pleasures of being home.

“She created a nice life for us though, didn’t she?” the Doctor asked.

Rose hummed as she sipped her tea. “Yeah, it was nice. Bit slow, compared to what we’re used to, and I’d never be able to stand two months in a time where I was nothing but a housewife, but… it was nice.” She looked up at the Doctor. “John was more tolerant than most men were back then, I think. Certainly more domestic, helping with the cooking.”

The Doctor nodded. “John was me. He might not have known that women deserved the vote, or that a black woman would one day be allowed to study medicine, but he knew you, and he knew Martha, so his mind sort of… made allowances for your personalities.”

He ran his fingers through her hair as he talked, and Rose turned her head slightly to encourage him.

“And since he was me, he was utterly besotted with his wife. He would have given you anything within his power. Fixing breakfast in the morning was an easy concession.”
There was a twinkle in his eye, and Rose pursed her lips. “I see that comment you’re wanting to make.”

The Doctor chuckled. “You’re a decent cook, Rose, but breakfast will never be your speciality. Apparently, you need to be awake to cook.”

Rose rolled her eyes. “All right, laugh if you must.”

“I just don’t understand how you only need half the amount of sleep of a normal human, and yet you’re still a zombie until you’ve had your first cuppa.”

“I could either blame it on being part human still, on being British, or on being my mum’s daughter. You pick.” Rose yawned and cuddled closer to the Doctor.

“Tired, love?” He brushed a kiss over her temple.

“It’s been a long day.” She stood up and stretched as another yawn overtook her. “Hard to believe that only a few hours ago, we were dancing together.”

“That we were,” he agreed. Unable to resist, he waggled his eyebrows at her. “And a few hours before that, we were dancing together.”

Rose stopped in the doorway and looked over her shoulder at him. The Doctor giggled at the way she rolled her eyes even as a half smile played with the corners of her mouth, and she shook her head. “Come on, let’s go to bed before I fall asleep standing up.”

Rose fell asleep almost as soon as the TARDIS dimmed the lights, but after two months of sleeping eight hours a night like a human, the Doctor wasn’t tired at all. Rose’s hair tickled his nose and he caught a whiff of the shampoo she’d used while they were in 1913—something chemical-y and sharp that didn’t smell at all like he was used to. But under the artificial perfume, she still smelled like herself, and the Doctor found himself pulling her closer.

Even more important than how she smelled, she felt like Rose. Her sleeping mind resting against his felt right in a way it hadn’t while their true selves had been locked up in the watches.

He would never regret opening his watch first, since it was the only way to rescue Rose, but that brief period when their bond had been unequal had almost hurt. For the first time in months, the Doctor took a moment to be thankful for Rose’s actions on the Game Station that made their bond possible. If she hadn’t opened the heart of the TARDIS to save his life, she would still be just as human has she had been for the last two months. He might not have known what he was missing, but now, more than a year after they’d taken the first steps towards a marriage bond, he couldn’t imagine living without her in his mind.

And I nearly turned my back on this. The Doctor snorted, remembering how reluctant he’d been to even accept the empathic connection they’d had, thanks to the TARDIS.

The ship hummed smugly, and the Doctor rolled his eyes. Yes, you were smarter than I was, he admitted, and he felt her preen.

Rose rolled onto her other side, and the Doctor followed, spooning her. Two years ago, the idea of a bond with Rose, marrying Rose, of holding her every night while she slept, was all a fantasy he refused to reach for. Now it was his life, and he would never let it—or her—go.
“I thought we might go someplace relaxing today,” the Doctor said the next morning as they got dressed. “As a thank you to Martha for watching out for us for two months.”

“Actually, Doctor, I’d like to go back to the cottage and collect a few things,” Rose said.

He stopped in the middle of tying his tie to stare at her. “But none of those clothes… those were all just from the wardrobe room.”

“I didn’t say clothes.” Rose buttoned up her black trousers and pulled on a blue jumper. “After two months of dresses every day, I’m fine letting those go, actually. Glad I don’t need to pull my hair up every day, too. But your Journal of Impossible Things is still there, and I don’t want to leave it behind.”

The Doctor sighed. “All right, fine. After one minor detour at the Tyler cottage, we’ll take off for a holiday trip.”

They told Martha their plans over breakfast, and when they were done eating, he moved the TARDIS a mile and a half from the Cartwright’s farm to the cottage he’d shared with Rose. When Rose opened the door, it was raining so hard he could see it from where he stood by the console. She looked at it in distaste and grabbed the umbrella she’d started keeping by the door before ducking outside.

She’d only been gone for five minutes when someone knocked on the TARDIS door. The Doctor and Martha exchanged surprised glances, then the Doctor walked slowly towards the door.

Timothy Latimer stood on the other side, wet hair plastered to his head and his hands clasped behind his back. “Doctor. Martha.”

The Doctor smiled in genuine delight, even as he blinked against the driving rain gusting in through the open doors. “Tim Timothy Timber.”

Tim held out his hand for the Doctor to shake. “I just wanted to say goodbye. And thank you. Because I’ve seen the future and I know now what must be done.” He swallowed hard, but didn’t shirk away from the gravity of his next words. “It’s coming, isn’t it? The biggest war ever.”

Timothy didn’t even jump when Rose put a hand on his shoulder, and the Doctor realised that holding the watches had opened up his psychic abilities even more than he’d known.

“You don’t have to fight, Tim,” Rose said gently.

He shook his head. “I think we do,” he said, with more maturity and wisdom than most men twice his age.

“But you could get hurt,” Martha protested.

Tim gave her a half smile. “Well, so could you, travelling around with him, but it’s not going to stop you,” he pointed out reasonably.

“Tim, I’d be honoured if you’d take this.” The Doctor handed him his fob watch.

Tim held it up to his ear. “I can’t hear anything.”

“No, it’s just a watch now. But keep it with you, for good luck.”
Martha stepped forward and gave Tim a hug. “Look after yourself.” She kissed him on the cheek, then went into the TARDIS.

Timothy looked at the Doctor and Rose, and something in his gaze made the hairs stand up on the back of the Doctor’s neck. “The Doctor and Rose Tyler,” he said in a distant voice. “Together, you burn at the centre of time and can see the turn of the universe. Even when the Wolf is silenced, your story will not be over.” His gaze sharpened. “You are… forever.”

The couple shared a startled glance. Neither of them had ever told anyone else about that word. “Timothy, you are brilliant,” the Doctor said sincerely. Rose gave him a hug, then joined Martha inside. “You’ll like this bit,” the Doctor told Tim, wishing he could see the look on the lad’s face when the ship dematerialised.

Rose watched the Doctor as he took the TARDIS into the vortex. The faint lines around his eyes and mouth and the tension in his body matched the anxiety he was projecting over the bond, and once he threw the dematerialisation lever, she took his hand and encouraged him to sit with her in the jump seat.

“What do you think Tim meant, about me being silenced?” she asked.

He sighed and ran a hand through his damp hair. “I honestly don’t have a clue, Rose,” he told her. “Last night, before I faced the Family, he asked if I could hear you, howling for your mate. I told him the truth—I can always hear you.”

Rose pulled her sonic out of her pocket and after adjusting the settings, pointed it at the Doctor to dry him off. “Do you think something’s going to happen, and you won’t be able to?”

“Not possible,” the Doctor said flatly. “If even changing species couldn’t get rid of our bond, nothing can.”

Rose nodded slowly. “Can we look Tim up?” she asked, changing the subject. “Go visit him in the future, see what he made of himself?”

Martha returned to the console room as Rose was suggesting that, having changed into a dry shirt. “I’d like that too, Doctor,” she agreed. “If he hadn’t taken the watches yesterday afternoon, the Family probably would have found them.”

The Doctor nodded. “It was the watches that kept us safe at the dance, actually. Remember the song? Tim opened my watch, and that distracted the Family long enough for Rose to get away from them.” He took Rose’s hand. “I should have thanked him for that.”

The TARDIS seemed to know exactly where they wanted to go, which confirmed the Doctor’s suspicion that she’d taken them to 1913 for Tim. When they landed, the Doctor read the coordinates. “Ah. Remembrance Sunday, 1990.”

“He fought in the war,” Rose realised.

“Almost every young man his age did,” the Doctor answered.

There was no need for discussion; as soon as the ship came to a stop, the three occupants of the TARDIS slipped outside. They’d landed on the outskirts of Farringham, and none of them were surprised to find a war memorial in the village green, where a vicar was presiding over a service.

An old soldier caught the Doctor’s eye—or maybe the Doctor caught his eye. When recognition crossed his face, the Doctor was certain. Tim nodded in thanks and acknowledgement, then looked
at something he held in his lap.

_The watch, the Doctor realised. He kept it all these years._

He turned his attention back to the vicar, who was reciting “For the Fallen.”

“They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old.

Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.

At the going down of the sun and in the morning

We will remember them.”

The closer the vicar got to the end of the poem, the more antsy and ready to leave the Doctor got. His instinct would have been to leave before the service reached its end, so he could avoid talking to Tim. Going back and revisiting old friends was never his thing.

_Maybe it should be_, Rose told him when she picked up on his indecision. _He saved our lives; he deserves more than just a little wave as we pass by._

The Doctor nodded, and when the service ended, he led her and Martha over to Tim.

“Doctor.” There was nothing of the boy Tim had been in his voice or appearance, unless you looked closely into his eyes.

“Hello, Tim.” The Doctor held his hand out. Tim’s handshake was firm, despite his age.

“Your watch saved Hutchinson and me,” the elderly man said. “I had a vision, you see, when the watch was still you—a vision of us, walking through a battlefield. My future self looked at the watch, then dived out of the way of an incoming bomb. And so, years later when I found myself in that same situation, I knew what to do.”

“You are an extraordinary man, Timothy Latimer.”

But Tim shook his head. “I’m an ordinary man who was able to use an extraordinary gift.” He tilted his head and looked at them. “You’ve only just come from here, haven’t you?” he asked.

The Doctor chuckled. “I said you should be top of your class, didn’t I? Yes, the TARDIS lets us take a shortcut, but sometimes I think living on the slow path is the bravest life. You can’t skip over the boring bits, or the uncomfortable parts.”

Tim smiled, the wisdom of old age shining in his eyes. “Oh, but Doctor. You make sacrifices, too. I’ve seen your life, remember? All the running, never slowing down to just enjoy a sunset, or a quiet morning with the people you love the most? I think you’re probably addicted to the pace, but I also know how hard it was for you to let go of John Tyler and go back to that life. In the end, you did it to save Rose, but you also did it because no one else can do what you do.”

Before the Doctor could feel guilty yet again that he couldn’t give Rose the kind of domestic life they’d shared in Farringham, a sharp telepathic prod from Rose reminded him that she didn’t want that life. Her agreement came through clearly as she slipped her hand into his. “We do have some quiet times, Tim,” she corrected, her voice soft. “And they’re even more special because they don’t come that often. Right, Doctor?”

His throat was too tight to speak, so he simply nodded.
Martha stepped forward in the silence and bent down to brush a kiss over Tim’s cheek. “You were one of the few that saw me,” she told him. “Thank you for that.”

“Martha Jones,” he said warmly, “I’m just honoured that I was able to know you.”

Something glinted in his eyes, making the Doctor suspect that once again, he knew more of their future than he was letting on. This time, however, he didn’t leave them with cryptic words, just a smile and a hearty handshake.

“I think it’s time for us to be going.” The Doctor put his hand on Tim’s shoulder and looked down at him. “Thank you, one more time, for all you did. We really couldn’t have done it without you.”

He stood back and snapped a salute at the old soldier. Tim’s shoulders, drooping with age, straightened as he returned the gesture. “Goodbye, Doctor.”

The quiet in the TARDIS as the Doctor sent them into orbit around Earth was contemplative. When the time rotor started moving and he turned around from the console, Rose was in the jump seat and Martha was leaning against the ramp railing.

“I forget sometimes,” she said, “that the things we do affect real people. We aren’t just jumping in and out of storybooks—these are actual people.”

The Doctor nodded.

“That’s why it’s hard for you, isn’t it?” She tilted her head and looked at them both. “You meet people and you’re a part of their lives for such a short time, and then you move on… and you don’t know what happened to them after.”

“Sometimes, it’s better that way,” the Doctor said quietly. “Sometimes you come back, and you regret what you find out. They’re gone, or they’ve wasted their lives.”

Martha shook her head. “And sometimes, you discover they grew to become more than you ever imagined they could be. Aren’t the moments like this worth risking the disappointments?”

The silence stretched and deepened, and then the Doctor pushed off from the console. “Come here,” he beckoned to both women as he pushed the doors open. Below them, the Earth hung suspended against a backdrop of inky black, the moon hiding in the background.

Martha leaned against the door jamb, the typical awed expression more muted tonight than it typically was when the Doctor showed companions this view.

“Tim was right,” he said. “We make sacrifices to live the life we do. We don’t have the kind of life where you run into the same fifteen people every week as you go to the market or out for coffee.” He nodded at the planet below them. “But this is the trade-off… and I think that makes it worth it.”

“Yeah,” Martha breathed. “It’s definitely worth it.”

The Doctor took Rose’s hand and rubbed his finger against her ring. It was worth it to them, and always would be. Despite his brief regret when they were talking to Tim, he knew Rose would never want a regular human life. In fact, he’d never seen anyone take to his lifestyle as naturally as she had. Rose rested her head on his shoulder, her contentment surrounding him like a warm blanket.

Martha though… He cast her a sidelong glance. How long would this be enough to make up for the things she was missing? The timelines around her were hazier than usual, but he could sense something coming, something that would change her mind and make her decide her place was in
London. He could only hope that whatever it was, the majesties of the universe she saw while she was with them still made the experience seem worth it.

Chapter End Notes

Of all the companions, I think Martha is the one who comes away with the clearest--and bleakest--picture of how much the Doctor's life costs. Donna obviously loses more, but the nature of what she lost means she's completely unaware of it. And Rose... Well, the Doctor's assessment here is correct. She assimilated into his lifestyle to a much greater degree than anyone else but Donna. I'd say she lost more in the end than Martha did (losing her entire universe is a pretty steep price, even if we don't add losing the Doctor into the mix), but I think she still thought it was worth it, in the end.
The Blame Game

The adventure referenced at the beginning of this chapter comes from The Pirate Loop by Simon Guerrier. The Doctor summarised the setup in chapter 25:

“Hmmm…” He pressed his tongue against the back of his teeth. “Well, there’s the spaceship Brilliant,” he said after a moment. “Famous passenger ship that just… disappeared. No one knows what happened to it.”

[…]

“That’s just the thing,” he said slowly. “No one really knows. There are theories, of course,” he added. “But each theory is more outrageous than the one before. The ship just vanished on its maiden voyage.” The Doctor scratched at his neck. “Of course, the one thing people tend to forget is that it vanished on the eve of a huge galactic war. Suspicious timing, that is.”

Chapter 31

For a week after they left Farringham, the TARDIS and her passengers took life easy, avoiding the trouble the Doctor liked to claim was just “the bits in between” and sticking to nice, relaxing destinations. The Doctor was anxious to get back to their regular life and the running, but Rose insisted he let Martha set the pace, since she was the one who’d been most affected while they were in 1913.

So when Martha joined them in the media room after lunch one day and said she had a destination in mind that was more his style of fun, he bounced to his feet and set off for the console room without even asking her where she wanted to go.

“You want to go where?” he asked five minutes later.

“The Brilliant,” Martha repeated. “You remember, the spaceship that disappeared? I want to find out what happened to it.”

The urge to run in the other direction was almost as strong as the lure of adventure—almost. The Doctor set the coordinates, giving Martha a lecture on fixed points as he went.

“We can’t do anything to stop it,” he warned her. “No matter what we discover, the Brilliant has to stay lost. Which means the less we get involved in the lives of the passengers, the better. The closer to you feel to them, the harder it’ll be to leave them to their fate.”

He flipped the dematerialisation lever, and as the time rotor moved up and down he said, “And finally…” He paused and looked at Rose, then at Martha, then heaved a sigh. “Oh, what’s the use? You’ll go wandering off no matter what I say.”

Rose patted his arm. “You see Doctor, you’re learning!”

He stuck out his tongue at her as they landed, hard.

oOoOoOoOo

The Doctor knew there was a reason he’d been wary of setting foot on the Brilliant. The ship wasn’t lost—it was caught in a malfunctioning time loop. Unfortunately, he hadn’t realised that until it was almost impossible for them to escape. The engine room and the TARDIS were cut off from the rest
of the ship by a time distortion that only allowed you to pass through it in one direction, away from the TARDIS.

That was only the beginning of the mess. When Martha went through the time distortion first on her own, she got caught in a different time stream than the Doctor and Rose. Thankfully, their habit of holding hands kept them from being separated.

And of course, before the time loop began, the Brilliant had been boarded by pirates. Badger pirates. Badger pirates with an unexpected love of canapés. Thankfully, only three of them had reached the ship before the Brilliant was cut off from the rest of reality by its time loop.

At least the time loop meant anyone the badger pirates killed—a fair amount of the Brilliant’s passengers, and Martha—simply came back to life. But instead of resetting everything periodically the way a time loop should, the Brilliant was in a sort of… time horseshoe, with a gap between the two ends of the loop. Every time the ship reached the end of the horseshoe, the experimental engines forced it to jump the gap, taking enormous amounts of fuel that the ship would soon run out of.

It had seemed like a simple thing, when he was on the bridge with Rose and Martha and the Brilliant’s crew: take the ship’s teleport back to the engine room, and use the TARDIS to repair the time loop. Easy peasy, for anyone with an advanced understanding of temporal mechanics.

And then he’d gotten another idea. A great idea. Brilliant, you might even say. They still needed to deal with the rest of the pirates, which was easier said than done as long as the Brilliant was separated from the rest of reality. So why not expand the bubble of space caught in the time loop? A little bit of jiggering with the TARDIS’ circuits, and the bubble doubled in size.

But when he stepped out of the TARDIS and back into the Brilliant’s engine room, he immediately suspected things had not gone to plan. The room was silent. No engine humming, no workers banging away. And then he turned a corner and saw the gaping hole where the engine had been. The engine the pirates had likely been after. The pirates who, thanks to his brilliant plan, were now inside the time loop, making it possible for them to board the ship.

Rose, where are you? he asked as soon as he grasped the situation.

On the pirate ship with Martha. The pirates came through…

He stepped back into the TARDIS and set the coordinates. Yes, I know, he told Rose as he sent the ship into flight. My fault, I didn’t think of that.

The belly of the pirate ship was dark and smelled like manky gym socks. The Doctor was heading for Rose when he was stopped by two gruff-looking badgers. “Oh, hello!” he said cheerfully. “I’m here to see your captain. Believe me when I tell you she’ll want to see what I’ve got.” He patted his pocket and raised his eyebrows.

The pirates looked at each other, then back at the Doctor. “Right then,” one of them said, jabbing his ray gun at him. “To the bridge with you!”

Rose and Martha had rolled their eyes and exchanged a knowing look when he swaggered around and attempted to insult the captain into leaving piracy behind. Martha elbowed Rose when the
Doctor deftly lifted the pirate’s gun from her belt, something Captain Florence didn’t notice until a few minutes later when she reached for it so she could shoot the Doctor.

She rocked back on her heels and sneered at the Doctor. “You gonna shoot me?”

“Nah,” said the Doctor. “You’ve got to have some other way for resolving disputes like this. Haven’t you?”

“We duel.” She withdrew a short, dangerous-looking dagger from her belt. “Can you duel?”

“I expect so.” Rose was surprised when the Doctor produced a matching weapon, then she remembered he’d taken it from one of the pirates earlier.

The Doctor dodged a few strikes, then lunged at the pirate captain, dagger in hand, and Rose shook her head. She had not expected a reenactment of Westley fighting an ROUS when they’d left the TARDIS this morning.

The Doctor chuckled as he rolled around on the floor with Captain Florence. “No flame spurts at least,” he told her. “I’ll agree with Westley on one thing though—I’m not sure I’d like to build a summer home here.”

“Stop. Chattering,” Captain Florence grunted. Then her breath escaped her in a loud gasp, and when the Doctor leapt to his feet, everyone could see the Captain’s own dagger protruding from her chest.

“I can help,” the Doctor offered, taking a step towards her.

The captain got to her feet unsteadily and pushed the Doctor back. Then, in a move entirely too agile for someone bleeding out through her chest, she whirled around and grabbed a ray gun from another badger.

“Thanks, Isobel.” She listed to the side, but managed to keep herself upright and hold the weapon remarkably steady.

“You can live,” she told the Doctor, “if you come ‘ere an’ kiss my boots.”

The Doctor arched an eyebrow, then straightened his tie. Rose suddenly realised why he’d made such a point of telling her the time loop had been enlarged.

“What time is it, Rose?” he asked.


“Right.” He rocked back on his heels and smirked at the pirate captain. “You can’t win,” he told her. “Your pirates have had a glimpse of another life, and that’ll never go away. Your clients are going to kill you if you go back to them. And you seem to have a dagger sticking out your front.”


“Yes, you can,” the Doctor agreed. “But didn’t I say? If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you could possibly imagine.”

Rose rolled her eyes. Only the Doctor would quote *Star Wars* while being held at gunpoint. He winked at her, and she shook her head.

“I can help you,” he offered the captain again. “Show you a better way of living. What do you say?”
Rose knew what she was going to say, knew what was going to happen, but it was still a shock when she shot the Doctor in the chest with the ray gun. Pink light engulfed him briefly, then his body disappeared.

As much as she wished the entire thing were some kind of parlour trick—the Doctor had hooked up a teleport to the guns, maybe?—the quick burst of pain from the shot followed by the bond twisting painfully as he first began to regenerate and then came back to life told her it was nothing of the sort.

Rose stared blankly at the place where the Doctor had stood, only a minute before. He was gone… but he wasn’t… and her head was killing her.

“Rose!”

Martha’s sharp voice broke into her daze, and she forced herself to look at her. “I’m… I’m fine. I—the Doctor… I mean, he’s…” Her gaze drifted back to the spot he’d disappeared from.

And then the time loop reset, and the uncomfortable dissonance in the bond resolved itself. Rose took a deep breath and drew herself up straight, then looked around at the badger pirates who watched her warily.

Cries of surprise when the Brilliant reappeared on the view screen distracted them momentarily. “Now that just ain’t right,” one of them muttered. “Back when I started as a pirate, things you blew up stayed blown up.”

Rose laughed, and the crew slowly turned back to look at her. “Are you all right, Rose?” Martha muttered. “Is it the loop? Did…” Rose nodded, and her friend let out a long breath. “Oh, thank god.”

The smile on her face unsettled the pirates further and finally, Stanley, a belligerent badger who’d hassled her and Martha from the moment they’d stepped on board, asked what they were all thinking.

“Why’re you smiling? Captain Florence, she killed your mate.”

Rose’s grin stretched even wider when the TARDIS engines echoed through the bridge. “Because I know something you don’t know.”

oOoOoOoOo

In the end, the Doctor’s resurrection proved to be the last bit of convincing the pirates needed to leave their old ways behind them. They couldn’t get out of the time loop to deliver the stolen engine anyway, so why not enjoy the good life—and the canapés—on the Brilliant instead.

There was still one more matter to be resolved: the passengers of the Brilliant.

“I thought you said we couldn’t interfere,” Martha said when the Doctor pointed that out.

“I also told you not to wander off, and look how that turned out,” the Doctor retorted. He gestured to the Brilliant’s ballroom, where former badger pirates danced alongside the Balumin passengers. “Most of them will choose to stay in the time loop,” he told her. “It’s an easy life, and either they’ve never had that, or it’s all they’ve ever known. The few that come with us won’t be enough to damage the timelines.”

So he made his offer, giving pirates, crew, and passengers alike a chance to leave the loop and go back to the real world. “Because once we leave,” he warned, “we won’t be coming back. This is your last chance to go somewhere else, to do something else. We leave in one hour.”
In the end, most of the crew and a handful of the pirates and passengers chose to leave. They dropped them off on Balum Prime, the Brilliant’s planet of embarkation, and then returned to their own life in the vortex.

Rose still had a slight headache when they were finally alone again. Although she’d felt the physical sensation of the Doctor being shot, the way a partial regeneration had twisted the bond had been far more uncomfortable. At least I’ll never actually feel the bond break.

Martha was the first to break the silence in the console room. “I’m sorry. Going to the Brilliant was my idea, but I never thought…” She gestured helplessly at them.

“Martha, it’s not your fault,” Rose said, feeling like she needed to get that printed on cards to hand out. “None of us had any idea what we were walking into. That’s how it almost always is, but it never stops us.”

“Yeah, but…”

“Really, it’s okay,” Rose promised.

Martha looked at them for a long moment and finally shrugged. “I’m tired, but there’s no way I could sleep yet. I think I’ll sit in the library and read for a bit.”

“Good night, Martha, and thank you,” the Doctor said.

As soon as Martha left, Rose turned to the Doctor. “Can we maybe spend the evening in the study tonight?” she asked. She needed to be with him, to be reassured that he was fine.

A swell of negative emotion over the bond caught her by surprise. “I’ve got some repairs to do,” he said without looking up from the console. “You and Martha should do something. Watch some telly or… paint your nails, or something.”

Rose narrowed her eyes. This was the closest the Doctor had come to lying to her since they’d formed their provisional bond. Oh, he had repairs to do, but she knew they weren’t urgent. He was choosing to do them, rather than spend time with her.

And if he hadn’t been projecting enough guilt to drown a planet, she would have argued. She still wanted to, because no matter how guilty he felt, she needed him right now.

But he finally looked at her, and the unspoken plea in his eyes stopped her. She nodded slowly. “Yeah, all right. Just remember to stop before the old girl gets irritated and shocks you, all right?”

The ghost of a smile crossed his face. “I will,” he promised.

Rose hesitated for a moment, but she finally decided to do what she needed, instead of what she could tell he wanted. Before leaving the console room, she walked over to him and kissed him on the cheek.

As soon as he was alone in the console room, the Doctor shucked his suit jacket and rolled up his sleeves. He knew Rose could tell he was avoiding her, but there truly were repairs that ought to be done. He’d harnessed the TARDIS’ power in an unconventional way in order to repair the time loop, and if he didn’t set things to rights, their next trip could easily land them centuries off course.

And he always did a better job puzzling over difficult issues while he had something to do with his
hands. The TARDIS hummed unhappily, but she didn’t argue when he slid under the console and started rewiring the circuits he’d had to reroute earlier in the day.

He was more than aware that both Rose and his ship thought he was ridiculous to feel guilty over what had happened on the Brilliant. After all, he certainly hadn’t asked Captain Florence to shoot him with her ray gun.

“Doesn’t change the fact that she got a taste of what it feels like when outside forces tamper with our bond,” he muttered.

The TARDIS pushed harder against his consciousness than usual, trying to use words instead of just emotions. That’s why she wants you now, Thief.

oOoOoOoOo

Martha stalked down the corridor, angrier with the Doctor than she had ever been. When she reached the console room, she thought it was empty at first glance—until she spotted his ratty Chucks sticking out from underneath the console.

“Oh, so there you are,” she said, feeling a surge of vengeful satisfaction when he jumped at her voice and hit his head on something.

“Oh!” He climbed out from underneath the console, rubbing a bump on his forehead. “Did you need something, Martha?”

She shook her head. “I’m fine. Your wife, on the other hand…”

“What do you mean?” He reached for Rose over the bond and sensed nothing more wrong with her than the same general anxiety she’d been projecting since he’d been shot. “What’s wrong with Rose?”

Martha snorted. “Nothing really, except she has the misfortune to be married to a complete wanker.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “You’re telling me that you’ve got that bond, and you can’t tell that she’s upset and wants you?”

He had the decency to wince, but he still didn’t move from where he was leaning against the console.

“Seriously, Doctor? I told her she should come talk to you, but do you know what she said? ‘I’m too tired for a fight.’”

“Martha…”

“Nope. I don’t want to hear it.” Martha shifted her weight to one foot and glared down at him. “I don’t know why you’re being such an arse, but Rose needs you, and I’m betting you need her right now too. For whatever reason, though, you’ve decided to deny the both of you. Frankly, that has got to be one of the most selfish things I’ve ever heard of.”

The Doctor sighed and scrubbed his hands over his face. “I know,” he said, the words muffled by his palms.

“Then what are you still doing here?”

He pressed his tongue against the back of his front teeth, and for a moment, Martha thought she was going to have to physically drag him to Rose. Then he nodded once and started towards the corridor.
After he’d taken a few steps, she added, “I left her in the library; dunno if she’s still there, though.”

The Doctor paused at the top of the ramp. “Thank you, Martha,” he said. He still didn’t feel like he deserved Rose’s company, but Martha was right—he did know she wanted him, and he’d been ignoring that awareness ever since they returned from the Brilliant.

Rose was still in the library, as Martha had told him, curled up in an armchair reading. She didn’t put the book down as soon as she heard him enter the room, instead finishing the chapter she was on first.

“Hi,” she said after she closed the book.

The Doctor shifted his weight from one foot to the other. To anyone else, her neutral voice might have sounded welcoming, but between that and the way she’d made him wait before she even looked at him, he knew exactly how upset she was with him.

“Hi.”

“Finished with your repairs?”

“Er… yeah.” He tugged on his ear. “Well, I made some progress anyway.”

“Good.”

He glanced at the couch where they would typically sit together, and knew her seating choice was purposeful. If you’re going to withdraw, then so will I, she was telling him. There was a matching arm chair on the opposite side of the fireplace, but he bravely sat alone on the couch instead, as an opening olive branch.

“Rose…” He paused and stared at her helplessly. He really didn’t know what to say, especially since he knew she didn’t agree with his guilt. “I’m sorry,” he said finally.

“What for?”

He ran a hand through his hair. “For… Because… On the ship…” Finally, he tapped his finger against his temple. “For this.”

Her recoil took him by surprise. “Don’t you dare apologise for the bond,” she ordered fiercely.

“What? No, that’s not what I… Ah, bollocks,” he muttered.

Some of the fire disappeared from her eyes, and she stared at him for a long moment. “Then what exactly are you apologising for, Doctor?”

“I know that the way the bond twisted when I started to regenerate hurt you, Rose.” It had hurt him, too, and the tension between them wasn’t helping his lingering headache. Your own fault, he reminded himself.

“Well, yeah,” she agreed, “but that’s not your fault.”

“How is it not?” he countered. “We wouldn’t have been on that ship if I hadn’t let Martha convince me to go to the Brilliant. No trip, no badger pirates, no duel, no momentary death.”

“Doctor, not everything bad that happens in the universe can be blamed on you.” Rose shook her head; the Doctor’s guilt complex had always been large enough to need its own postcode, but there was more here than just guilt. The same unworthiness she’d picked up on after they’d run into the
Daleks was there underneath it. He felt guilty for the danger she’d faced when she was with him because he didn’t think he deserved to have her in his life in the first place.

Another memory came to her, and Rose took a stab in the dark. “John thought you were dangerous for me to be around. Is that what you think too, Doctor?”

His hand clenched into a fist. “How can I think anything else when I was proven right not an hour later?” he finally said, his voice hoarse. “The Family abducted you to get to me.”

“The Family wanted to kill us both. Abducting me was only step one of their plan.”

The Doctor’s eyebrows rose. “Oh, and that reminder makes me feel so much better. Your life would have been so much better if you’d never met me, Rose.”

Though she’d known he was labouring under some serious misconceptions, Rose had no idea where that ridiculous notion came from. “Why do you think my life would have been better if I’d never met you?” she asked.

The Doctor finally looked at her then, incredulity in his eyes. “Well, you wouldn’t come close to being killed by various alien races on a monthly basis for a start,” he said sarcastically. “In the first month after we met, you nearly died three times. Once on Platform One, when Cassandra trapped you in the room without sun filters, once in Cardiff when I decided I knew better than you and allowed a malevolent alien race to possess a young woman, and once in Utah when we found the Dalek.” He raised an eyebrow at her. “We won’t mention Downing Street, since you ordered me to have Mickey fire that rocket at us.”

“You’re bloody right I did,” Rose retorted, her simmering anger boiling over. “I’m surprised your ego can stand not taking credit for that one, too.”

“What do you mean, my ego? This isn’t about ego, Rose.”

“Isn’t it?” she countered. “You mean the fact that you’re claiming responsibility for all the major events in my life since we met isn’t a sign of ego?”

He slouched back onto the couch. “Not all of them,” he muttered. “Just the ones where you were in danger.”

Rose rolled her eyes. “So your ego has a skewed perception of how much good you’ve done versus the bad you haven’t been able to stop. No surprise there.” He crossed his arms over his chest and pouted, and she sighed. “Plus, you’re really missing the point, Doctor. You’re confusing quality of life with safety.”

Confusion pulsed over the bond. “Of course your life would be better if you were safe,” he stated.

“Really?” That single sentence brought her anger back to full boil. *How dare he just disregard how much better my life has been since we met?*

“What do you mean, my life was like before I met you, Doctor?” Rose jumped to her feet and started pacing. “You said it, actually, the morning after we met. ‘Eat chips, go to bed, and watch telly.’ You were right. That was my life. It was all I’d ever been told I could expect, but there you were, saying there was something more out there, something better than a boyfriend who was more concerned with catching the last five minutes of a football match than talking to his girlfriend when her work got blown up.”

He slumped onto the couch and refused to meet her eyes. “But I pulled you into this life without
really explaining what it was like... I just wanted you with me so badly...”

“Without explaining?” Rose put her hands on her hips and glared at him. “I asked you, straight out, if travelling with you was always that dangerous. You told me yes, and I still chose to come with you. What part of that leaves me as the ignorant girl you think you took advantage of?”

The Doctor jumped to his feet. “And you said no!” he exclaimed. “It wasn’t until I came back and told you I could travel in time that you agreed. The adventure outweighed the danger, and I should have...”

Rose blinked in surprise. “You think I said no because you told me it was dangerous?” Some things were finally starting to make sense. “Doctor, you were offering me so much more than I’d ever been told I could expect out of life. Everyone I knew said I could never have more than beans on toast and a mediocre relationship, and there was Mickey, hanging on me and reminding me of it. I wasn’t afraid of the danger; I was afraid to reach for more.”

Rose could feel him trying to make sense of what she was saying, and her voice softened. “You tried to send me back to that life once, remember?”

“Hard to forget.”

“And it never occurred to you that I came back partly because I didn’t want that life anymore?”

Confusion blossomed on his face. “But it was... I mean, your mum was there. Why wouldn’t you...”

Rose sighed. Fighting against his ingrained belief that he had somehow ruined her life was like walking through treacle. “Well first off, you daft alien, I was already in love with you. Of course I could still have a fantastic life, even if you weren’t in it, but that wasn’t what I wanted. I wanted you.”

He was utterly baffled by that statement, and Rose decided words clearly weren’t going to convince him. Instead, she reached for the bond and let him see himself the way her twenty-year-old self had when she’d been falling in love with him.

When a hint of a smile finally crossed his face, she sensed victory. “You believed in me, Doctor, and you made me believe in myself. When I was with you, I wasn’t just a girl from the Estates with no A-levels. I was someone valuable. I’d never had that before.”

“You were always valuable, Rose,” the Doctor stated firmly.

She smiled at him. “Yeah, but until someone really treats you like you are, it’s hard to believe.”

The Doctor reached for their bond and offered an apology, and Rose felt her anger fade. But before they closed the conversation, there was one more point she wanted to make.

“You were always valuable, Rose,” the Doctor stated firmly.

She smiled at him. “Yeah, but until someone really treats you like you are, it’s hard to believe.”

The Doctor reached for their bond and offered an apology, and Rose felt her anger fade. But before they closed the conversation, there was one more point she wanted to make.

“Doctor, you’re so caught up in this belief that you don’t deserve me, or that I deserve better than you, that you’ve forgotten the most important thing I deserve.”

“What’s that?”

“I deserve to be allowed to make my own choices about my life. I deserve to have those choices respected, not disregarded as if I didn’t know any better when I made them.”

The Doctor stared down at his hands. He knew what she was telling him—not everything was about
him. Rose’s constant assertion that, beyond being misplaced, his guilt was also egotistical was hard to swallow. His guilt was over his own actions, wasn’t it?

But doubts eroded at that belief. He had felt guilty for what had happened to Rose when she opened the heart of the TARDIS, until they’d fully understood the gift that had been. Looking into the time vortex had been her own choice, though—why did he take responsibility for the results?

And when she’d first grieved for Jackie, he’d felt guilty that she would never see her mother again, even though Rose had chosen to stay with him knowing full well what the cost would be.

Those examples were enough to convince him that Rose was right. And the guilt I’m feeling right now over being an arse is completely deserved. He shook his head, then got up to stand with her in front of the fireplace.

Her blonde hair gleamed in the firelight, and the flickering of the flames was reflected in her eyes. The Doctor looked at her for a moment, fiercely proud of the confident way she held herself. She was his partner in every sense of the word—not only standing beside him, but standing up to him.

It was time he accepted everything that meant.

“You’re right,” he told her, his voice low. At the same time, he let his pride shine over the bond, and was rewarded when her eyes lit up. “You are an amazing, brilliant woman, capable of making your own choices. No one is responsible for your actions but you.”

“Thank you,” she breathed.

He tilted his head and considered her. There had been something in the raw quality of her voice when she talked about who she was when they met…

“Rose, you know I never saw you as just an Estates girl, don’t you?”

She blinked, and even though she tried to hide it, he caught a hint of insecurity. “How could you not? When you met me, I was dressed exactly like a chav—ratty jeans, worn hoodie, dyed blonde hair…”

The Doctor reached out and pushed a strand of that hair back over her ear. “When I met you, I saw a human in danger. I didn’t take time to analyse your wardrobe. I just grabbed your hand and told you to run.”

“Yeah, but when I opened my mouth—”

“When you opened your mouth, I almost immediately adjusted my impression to ‘clever human.’ Rose, you’d just been moments from dying at the hands of shop window dummies, and despite that, practically the first thing you said to me was a very logical assumption about what was happening. I was impressed with you right away.”

Rose rolled her eyes. “Right, that’s why you were always calling humans stupid apes—because I was so clever and impressive.”

The Doctor winced. “It’s possible I’ve always been rude and not ginger.”

Instead of laughing, she bit her lip.

The lingering self-doubt made his hearts ache. “Right, Rose. You need to listen, because this might be the most important thing I’ve ever told you. You did not become valuable when you stepped into
the TARDIS. Travelling with me didn’t make you clever or interesting. You have always been those things.”

Her laugh was self-deprecating. “Doctor, you can’t tell me I haven’t changed since I met you.”

“Well of course you’ve changed. Four years have passed, almost. You’ve grown and matured, and you’ve learned things. But you always had that potential.”

She worried her bottom lip between her teeth while she wrestled with the idea, just like he’d struggled to accept her perspective on his guilt complex. Finally, she nodded slowly and looked up at him.

“So, I guess we both need to remember this conversation, yeah? You need to remember that you’re not always to blame for what happens, and I need to remember that meeting you didn’t suddenly give me value I didn’t have before.”

Their bond relaxed for the first time since the Doctor’s near death experience as the charged emotions passing back and forth between them settled down. They sighed simultaneously as their mutual headache faded, and then they stepped into each other’s arms.

Rose rested her head on his chest, right over his hearts, and the Doctor stroked his hand lightly through her hair. “I am sorry that happened,” he said in a soft voice. “Not because I feel responsible for getting shot, but because I love you and I will always be upset when something hurts you.”

She hummed an agreement and traced random patterns on his back with her fingers. “Well, in that sense, I’m sorry it happened too.” An echo of remembered discomfort rippled over the bond. “We’ll just have to avoid situations like this in the future.”
Decade Lag

Chapter Summary

A touch from an Angel sends the Doctor, Rose, and Martha back to 1969, and the jaunt away from the TARDIS has unexpected consequences.

You can read Rose's conversation with Jackie [here].

“Are you sure about this, Doctor?” Rose stared up at the abandoned house. The weathered wrought iron fence, broken windows, and dilapidated conservatory overrun by ivy made the place look like a horror movie set—not someplace she wanted to spend her Sunday afternoon, unless she had to.

The Doctor checked the sonic screwdriver again. “Yep! This is where the odd temporal readings I’ve been getting are coming from.” He looked at Rose. “You know I wouldn’t have brought us here if it wasn’t important.”

She nodded; they were in London 2007, only a few weeks before ghosts started appearing all over planet Earth. The short phone call she’d been able to sneak in with her mum had only made Rose miss her more. Being in the same city and yet unable to go visit was almost physically painful.

“Any idea what’s causing those strange readings?” Martha had her arms wrapped protectively around her waist and she eyed the house warily. “So we know what to expect before we walk into bleak house here?”

“Oh, the two of you!” The Doctor clucked. “You can handle a living sun in the Taraji system and a migration of alien lizards, but I bring you to an old house in London in your time, and you’re ready to pack it in.”

“Maybe it’s because we’ve seen those things that an old house doesn’t look quite so innocuous,” Rose suggested drily. “Still, I saw those readings too, and they were bad… so I guess we don’t have much of a choice.”

The Doctor grabbed the fence and vaulted over the top. Rose looked at him affectionately, then pulled her sonic out of her pocket and unlocked the gate.

He sniffed. “Sure, take the easy way in.”

Rose took his hand. “Because you’ve never used the psychic paper as an easy way to get into places?”

“You have to admit, Doctor, she’s got you there,” Martha said.

He rolled his eyes. “Come on, this way,” he said, leading the way around to the side of the house.

Leaves rustled in a late summer breeze, and Rose caught a whiff of honeysuckle as they slowly circled the house. The boarded-up windows and doors didn’t make it look any more inviting than the “Danger, Unsafe Structure” sign that hung on the fence.

“You never answered Martha’s question. Do you know what’s causing these readings?”
He shook his head. “No, and that’s part of what’s got me curious. Usually, when the TARDIS picks up temporal anomalies, I can place them, but these are something I’ve never seen before.”

“Oh, that’s just what I wanted to hear,” Martha muttered. “Something unknown, how exciting.”

“Inside or outside?” Rose asked.

The Doctor scanned the house, then shook his head. “The most recent activity was outside.” He walked towards the back garden. “This way!”

Rose looked at Martha and winked. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

“You didn’t just say that,” the Doctor whined. “Why do people always have to say that?”

Martha raised her eyebrows, and Rose pointed at the Doctor and mouthed, “For that reaction.” Both women chuckled, but quickly hid their smiles when the Doctor spun around.

The aroma of honeysuckle grew stronger as they moved deeper into the overgrown garden. The leafy canopy overhead blocked most of the sun, and Rose shivered slightly.

As the Doctor led them towards a path lined by a tall hedge, she saw movement out of the corner of her eye. When she turned around, the only thing she saw was a statue of an angel near the other side of the house.

She narrowed her eyes at it, but before she could say anything, the Doctor froze, then immediately backed up. “Oh, this is not good,” he muttered, ignoring Martha’s protests as he stepped on her feet.

Rose peered over his shoulder and spotted another angel. “What’s not good about it? It’s just a statue.”

“Don’t look away from it,” he ordered. “It’s a statue as long as you’re looking at it, but if you look away, it will come after us.”

Dread crept up Rose’s back and she spun around, letting go of the Doctor’s hand. The statue she’d seen earlier was just five feet from her. Unlike the angel the Doctor was facing, who had its hands covering its face, this one had its arms stretched out, grabbing for her.

“So, if one of these things is not good, how bad would two be?” she asked casually.

“Two?” he squeaked. “Oh, two. Well that’s… You keep looking at that one. We need to get away from here as quickly as possible.”

Rose felt him fumbling for her hand, and she reached backwards and let him latch onto her, then reached out with her other hand until she found one of Martha’s. Hand-in-hand, they started back the way they came, Rose keeping her eyes on the angel in front of her. She wanted to run, but the Doctor and Martha could only move so fast, since they were walking backwards. Once they got past the angel she had noticed first, she breathed a little more easily.

“Not to cause unwarranted concern,” Martha said a moment later as they passed an intersection in the maze, “but there’s three of them.”

The Doctor’s anxiety ratcheted up to full panic, making it difficult for Rose to control her own fear. “Right. Martha, you watch that one then. Here’s what we’re going to do,” he said, slowly and deliberately. “We’ll keep moving towards the TARDIS, but under no circumstances does anyone let go of anyone else’s hand. Is that clear?”
Rose and Martha both muttered their assent. The oppressive fear hanging over the garden made the scent of honeysuckle seem cloying instead of sweet, so Rose was relieved to take a breath of fresh air when they were out of the maze.

Her relief disappeared when they turned the corner at the front of the house. She could see the TARDIS, just on the other side of the gate, but between them and the sagging fence stood another stone angel. She froze, and the Doctor and Martha backed into her.

“What is it, Rose?” the Doctor asked.

“Well. It’s possible there are four of them,” she said, in as even a tone as possible.

“Four?!” he and Martha exclaimed together.

A moment later, Rose felt a whooshing feeling in her head, and then she landed, hard, in an alley.

The Doctor groaned and put his hand to his head. “Time travel without a capsule—not recommended,” he grumbled.

“Time travel?” Martha repeated. “You’re joking, right?”

“Nope,” the Doctor said. He offered them both a hand and pulled them to their feet. “Everyone okay? Any bumps or bruises?”

When Rose and Martha both shook their heads, he started walking towards the street, lecturing as he went. “As I said, time travel without a capsule. Those statues are known as the Weeping Angels. As long as someone is looking at them, they’re frozen in stone, but as soon as you look away, they can come after you. And they’re fast, too.”

“What do they do to you?” Rose asked.

“With just one touch, they send you back in time. You live out your life in the past, and they feed off all the time you would have lived in the future.” He jumped to his feet. “Each Angel sends its victims to a different location, which was why I wanted us to all hold hands.”

Rose nodded. “So we’d go back to the same year if we were caught.”

“Exactly.”

“And that year is…”

“1969,” the Doctor and Rose chorused.

“Wait a minute!” Martha said. “If we travelled in time without the TARDIS, then we have no way of getting back home.”

The Doctor reached into his pocket and pulled out the folder from Sally Sparrow. “Not quite, Martha,” he told her. “That woman we met before we went to Farringham told me I’d need this when we got stuck in 1969. From that, I’d guess that all the information we need to get home is contained right here.” He handed Rose the folder and retrieved a wallet. “And after meeting her, I collected some old money I had lying around the TARDIS. We should have enough to get us through the first week.”

“Great,” Rose said. “Let’s go sit down somewhere and look at this while we eat.”

Martha smirked. “You mean, let’s go get chips,” she translated.
The Doctor chuckled when Rose huffed in indignation. “Well, since we need to make our funds last, a cheap dinner isn’t a bad idea.”

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“It’s been ages since I’ve had fish and chips served in real newspaper,” Martha said an hour later when they had settled around a table at the back of a chippy.

“There’s one near the Estate that still does,” Rose said as she sprinkled a liberal amount of vinegar over her entire meal, and then a little less on the Doctor’s. “It’s my favourite—they just don’t taste right otherwise.”

The Doctor pulled the stack of papers out of the folder and spread them out on the table. “Let’s see what Sally Sparrow has to say about getting us home.”

He ate the salty, sour chips one-handed while he looked through the stack of pictures, raising his eyebrows when he saw the note they evidently left for her under the wallpaper at Wester Drumlins. He wasn’t keen to go back there, but according to the handwritten note from Sally on the back of the photo, if she hadn’t read their warning, she would have been hit in the back of the head with a pot thrown through a window. None of the rest of the story would have happened, which meant she wouldn’t have had the folder to give to them.

Oh, I hate paradoxes. He pinched the bridge of his nose and set the photos down.

He picked up a stack of four sheets of paper stapled together next and quickly scanned over it. Speaking of paradoxes... it's going to be a long couple of months.

“Oh. Well that... that’s not exactly what I was expecting,” he mumbled.

“What?” Martha said. “What’s wrong?”

“What makes you think something’s wrong?”

“Maybe the frown on your face?” she suggested. “Come on, what is it?”

“Well... From the sound of it, we’re going to be stuck here for a while.”

“Define, ‘a while,’” Martha ordered.

The Doctor squirmed under her glare. “A few months, maybe? But like I said, we’ve got enough money to live on until—” He glanced at Martha and decided against upsetting her with news of her employment just yet. “Until we can make other arrangements.”

“So, what’s our first step?” Rose asked. “Outside of the obvious things like finding a place to stay.”

The Doctor pulled a photo of a familiar house from the stack and tossed it down on the table. “It looks like we get to go back to Wester Drumlins.”

“No,” Martha said. “Absolutely not.”

“If we don’t, then Sally Sparrow will never find out about the angels and collect all this information for us, and without this folder, I don’t know how we’d get home.”

Martha slouched down in her seat. “Fine,” she muttered. “What all is in this special folder?”

The Doctor looked around at the chippy, which was slowly filling up with dinner patrons. “Why
don’t we find someplace to stay tonight, and I’ll tell you about it then?” he suggested.

Three hours later, they were in a tiny hotel room, staring at the contents of the folder which had been spread out across the bed.

“So let me see if I’ve got this.” Rose picked up the typed story of Sally’s interactions with Billy Shipton. “After we take care of writing the warning for Sally Sparrow and wallpapering over it, we need to build a video recording system. That way, when the angel sends Billy Shipton back, he can tape our half of the conversation with Sally.” She pointed at the transcript. “Then sometime in the future, he’s going to become… what, a video producer or something? And that recording will be added as an Easter egg to the seventeen DVDs on this list.”

The Doctor nodded. “And I’ll program an autopilot routine into the formatting of the video. Once the causality loop is complete and Sally and Larry take the DVD into the TARDIS, she’ll bring herself to us.”

“You’re both skipping over the part where I have to go get a job in order to pay our way here,” Martha interjected.

“Oh, come on, Martha,” the Doctor said. “It’s an adventure! Think of this as an extended holiday in the past.”

“Right.” Martha pushed herself off the bed and walked over to the door. “Well, if I’m going to be taking a working holiday in 1969, I’d better go to my own room and get some sleep. Tomorrow: flat-hunting.”

“We’ll give you a shout for breakfast,” Rose promised, and Martha nodded half-heartedly as she left the room.

Once she was gone, Rose yawned and started undressing. “Well, she’s right about one thing,” she said as she folded up her clothes and set them on the dresser. “Tomorrow is going to be a busy day, and some of us are still human enough to need sleep every night.”

The Doctor cleared the papers off the bed, then stripped down to his vest and pants and climbed under the sheets with Rose. Having her curled up beside him was the only thing that felt right about this whole mixed up day, and he cherished the familiar feeling.

“Good job, by the way,” she mumbled into his chest.

“Good job at what, love?” he asked.

“Not blaming yourself for our extended holiday,” she told him. “Just in case though, this really isn’t your fault.”

The Doctor chuckled. “It might surprise you, but this is one time when I can wholeheartedly agree with that.”

She kissed his neck. “Good.”

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Even with the psychic paper and a stack of cash, it wasn’t easy to find a flat. Apparently, it was easier to convince a guard that you were the King of Belgium than it was to convince a London landlord to let to you without proper identification. Eventually, they found someone willing to let to them and handed over an unbelievable two hundred quid for first and last months’ rent.
Rose sighed with relief as she turned the key in the lock. She’d woken up feeling less rested than she had the night before, and hours spent hunting for a flat had left her knackered and ready for a rest. Even so, she took one look at the sheets on the bed she’d be sharing with the Doctor and shook her head.

“Come on, Martha,” she said, grabbing her friend’s hand. “We need to get a few things before the shops close up. Doctor, why don’t you poke around the neighbourhood, see if you can’t find any electrical shops or something?”

They returned two hours later, exhausted but victorious, both carrying bags of bedding and a few other essentials. Martha also had food for breakfast, and Rose had take-out curry.

“You bought pillows?” the Doctor asked when he caught sight of the bags.

“If you think I’m putting my head on that old pillow in there, you’re wrong,” Rose said bluntly as Martha took her purchases into her room. “I don’t mind used couches or even mattresses, but used pillows and sheets that might not have been washed in ages? No ta.”

The confusion cleared from his face and he chuckled. “I can’t argue with that.” He took the take-away bag from her and walked into the kitchen. “I’ll dish this up while you get the bedroom ready, and then we can eat.”

Once the bed was made, the temptation to crawl under the covers was almost too strong to resist. Rose could hear voices from the kitchen, though, and the sound of cutlery clinking as someone set the table. She sighed and took one last look at the plump pillows before leaving the room.

The next morning came far too quickly for Rose’s taste. After supper the night before, she’d fallen asleep on the sofa watching telly and had only been vaguely aware that the Doctor had woken her up so she could go to bed. Now the sun was streaming through their window, and sounds from the kitchen made it impossible to drift back to sleep.

Then she caught the scent of bacon frying and her mouth watered. Finally feeling a little bit like normal, she threw the covers off, pulled on her brand new dressing gown, and shuffled into the kitchen.

“Good morning, lazybones!” The Doctor handed her a cuppa and kissed her cheek. “Martha and I were just talking about our plans for the day.”

Rose sat down and breathed in the steam from her tea, letting the familiar fragrance wake her up further. “Really?” she said after taking a sip. “And what have you decided?”

The Doctor flipped the bacon, then leaned back against the counter. “Well, I need to visit the electronics shops. In addition to the recorder and autocue, I want to build a timey-wimey detector.”

Martha groaned. “He’s been using that phrase non-stop,” she told Rose. “Because apparently this brilliant Time Lord can’t think of any better explanation than a big ball of timey-wimey stuff.”

The Doctor sniffed, and Rose hid her smile behind her teacup. Sure, it had taken her longer to wake up than usual, but she was feeling more like herself with every minute.

“What will your timey-wimey detector do, Doctor?”

He bounced lightly on his toes. “It’ll help us track down Billy Shipton, since we don’t have an
address where he'll show up.”

Rose watched him take up the bacon. “An’ how are we gonna know when Billy shows up? Will your gizmo ding or something?”

“Oh, that’s a brilliant idea! I always like a nice ding.”

Her amusement finally broke out in giggles, and he looked at her, affronted, as he sat down beside her. “What’s wrong with that?”

She shook her head and started eating. *Nothing. Just... I love you.*

He grinned and hummed happily. *I love you, too.*

Martha eyed the two of them. “Absolutely bonkers, both of you,” she muttered. “Anyway, Rose, while your husband is off scavenging through London’s electrical shops, you and I get to take care of domestics. Stocking the kitchen, setting up any accounts we need…”

“Getting more clothes,” Rose added.

“What?” the Doctor protested. He pointed at the two of them in their new pyjamas and dressing gowns. “You bought clothes last night!”

Rose rolled her eyes. “We bought one outfit each, and nightclothes, Doctor. We didn’t have time for anything more than that.”

“Yeah, and not all of us are keen on wearing the same thing day in and day out.” Martha looked pointedly at his brown suit. “Won’t that get a little rank after a week anyway?”

The Doctor tugged on his tie. “Nope! I’ll use the sonic to freshen it up every night.”

She pressed her lips into a thin line and shook her head. “All right, but just because you’re fine with that doesn’t mean we are. So yeah, we’ll go clothes shopping, Rose.” She scowled. “It’ll give me an idea of shops I might apply to, anyway.”

Rose took a bite of toast to conceal her sudden guilt. Why’d the transcript state that only Martha worked? She was tempted to look for a job despite what the future/past version of her apparently told Sally Sparrow, but she had a feeling that even if she tried, she’d find out soon enough why she didn’t end up getting a job. She just hoped it was a reason she could live with.

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When Rose and Martha returned from shopping shortly after lunch, the flat was littered with electrical parts—but there was no Doctor in sight. Martha looked quizzically at Rose, but instead of answering the unspoken question, she just shrugged and mumbled something before disappearing into her own room.

Martha frowned at the closed door. Sure, they’d done a fair amount of walking as they crossed their errands off their list, but her exhaustion seemed disproportionate to the amount of exercise they’d done—especially since Martha had never really seen Rose tired before.

She sighed and looked around the flat. “Yeah, I’m not living in a pile of junk for however long it takes us to get home,” she grumbled. She started moving bits and bobs around, trying to be careful to keep like with like but more concerned with reclaiming part of the flat for herself. “Does your room on the TARDIS look like this? More power to Rose if it does.”
Rose still hadn’t emerged from her room when Martha was done cleaning, so she set out to make dinner to keep herself busy. The homey smell of shepherd’s pie soon filled the flat, and that finally got her friend moving.

“Is it really dinner time already?” she asked as she pushed her hair back from her face.

“It will be by the time the food is done.”

Martha started to ask her to tell the Doctor to come up, but before she could get the words out, he walked through the door, looking proud and carrying a backpack.

“I’ve done a bit of prep work,” he said, unzipping the pack. “Look, everything we’ll need to do the Wester Drumlins job tonight.”

Martha peered into the bag and saw nothing but a few cans of black spray paint. “Ah, except for the wallpapering supplies,” she pointed out.

He shook his head. “Nope! I also did a little recon this afternoon and discovered there are old papering supplies in one of the hall cupboards.”

Rose raised an eyebrow. “You’re sure this place is abandoned already, right? I mean obviously we have to do this whether it is or not, but I’d really rather not get caught by the owners returning home.”

“It is completely unoccupied,” he assured her. “No humans, and no Weeping Angels.”

“Well there’s a relief,” Martha mumbled. “Go get cleaned up. Dinner’s almost ready.”

The Doctor dropped the bag on the sofa then paused and looked around the flat. “You cleaned,” he said.

“Well, you didn’t exactly leave me any place to sit. Or cook,” she pointed out tersely.

“Right.” He looked at Rose, then back at her. “Sorry about that. I had it all spread out so I could see what I’d found and what was left to get. I didn’t mean to make you clean up after me.”

She shrugged. “It gave me something to do this afternoon. Just don’t make a habit of it, yeah?”

He nodded, then disappeared into the bathroom to wash his hands.

“So I guess I get to go job hunting tomorrow,” Martha said when they were all sitting around the table ten minutes later.

“Take the psychic paper and show it to them if they ask for your CV,” the Doctor offered. “You shouldn’t have any problem getting a job.”

“Yeah, that’s not really what’s bothering me,” Martha said bluntly. “That transcript said I’d be working in a shop. Couldn’t I do something else, like secretarial work? My typing is pretty decent, though I don’t know shorthand.”

The Doctor shook his head. “The transcript locks us into a causality loop,” he explained. “Sally Sparrow wrote down that you’re working in a shop because you said you worked in a shop.”

Martha sighed. “I guess it’s better than maid work,” she said reluctantly.

“I could always be the one paying our way,” Rose suggested when she saw Martha’s frustration.
Martha shook her head. “Then what would I do? Sit around the flat with the Doctor all day while he tries to build a video camera out of dental floss and chewing gum? He’d drive me mad.” She took a drink of her beer. “Besides, I bet it would cause just as much of a timey-wimey problem if you worked instead of me as it would if I did something besides working in a shop.”

“I truly am sorry, Martha,” the Doctor said. “But you’re not the only one who’s constrained by what the transcript says. Do you think I wouldn’t rather call up some old friends of mine and see if I couldn’t track myself down and get us a ride home? I’d love to, but the transcript says I build a video recorder and autocue, so that’s what I get to do.” He shrugged. “The way time worked, I probably wouldn’t have any luck if I did try to get us a ride, and then I’d be right back where I started, making an autocue.”

Some of the resentment cleared from her face at that. “Oh, I wish you could just call us a ride home,” she said fervently. “But, when you put it that way, I guess I’ll hit the shops tomorrow.”

When they finished eating, the Doctor and Rose did the dishes, then the Doctor grabbed the backpack and slung it over one shoulder. “Come on then, let’s go.”

It was dark when they reached the derelict house, making it easier to sneak in. As the tallest, the Doctor was nominated to paint the message on the wall. Then they worked together to paper over it.

When they were done, they eyed their work critically. “I don’t think it really matters what it looks like,” Martha said finally. “No one ever lives here again, do they?”

The Doctor shook his head. “I don’t think so, not from what Sally’s note said.”

“So no one is going to be examining the quality of the papering,” she pointed out. “And I’d really like to not be here anymore, if it’s the same to you.”

“Agreed,” Rose said. “I know the Angels aren’t here yet, but it’s giving me the creeps.” A huge yawn overtook her. “Besides, I’m ready for bed.”

The Doctor eyed Rose. It hadn’t escaped his notice that she’d been more tired than usual over the last few days. “Let’s call a cab to take us home,” he suggested as they left the house behind. “No reason to sit waiting at a bus stop when we’ve got cash.”

Of course, they still had to walk to a more central area to find a cab, and by the time they did, Rose was leaning heavily on him. Once they found a taxi, she rested her head on his shoulder and was asleep in minutes.

Martha met his gaze over the top of Rose’s head. “She’s not usually tired like this.”

He rubbed at his eyebrow. “No, she’s not.”

When they reached the flat, he was able to wake her with a soft shake and a gentle telepathic nudge. She and Martha waited while he paid the cabbie, and then Rose wrapped her arm around his waist again as they walked inside.

“Well, I need to be up early so I can look for work,” Martha said, “so I should go to bed.” She glanced at Rose and frowned, then raised her eyebrows at the Doctor. “Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help, all right?”

“Thanks, Martha.”
He led Rose to the loo. “Don’t you want to wash your makeup off before we go to bed?” he asked, familiar with her bedtime rituals.

She grumbled slightly, but seemed to wake up a little when the cold, damp flannel hit her face. The Doctor leaned against the door and watched her, not wanting her to trip and hit her head on something.

He followed her into their room and turned down the covers while she fumbled through undressing as though she’d been up for two full, busy days. “How long have you felt like this, Rose?” he asked when she slowly pulled a nightgown over her head.

“How? Felt like what?” she asked as she crawled under the covers.

Real concern knit his brow then, but Rose was asleep before he could clarify the question. He fingered his sonic screwdriver and eventually did the most basic scan possible. It cleared the worst of his fears, and reassured that she wasn’t suffering from some fatal disease, he was able to strip out of his own clothes and stretch out beside her.

Normally, even in her sleep Rose would sense him joining her in bed and curl up against him, but tonight, she didn’t move. Wanting her to rest, the Doctor contented himself with taking her hand.

He sighed as he stared at up the boring ceiling. Stuck on Earth yet again, and judging by the information he had, it looked like they’d be here for a few months. Even though the transcript and photos didn’t confirm that the TARDIS found them, the Doctor had no doubt that the plan worked. Or would work. He rubbed at his forehead; tenses in time travel could be a real headache.

And all that would only be a minor inconvenience if it wasn’t becoming apparent that Rose was ill. The Doctor’s big Time Lord brain could occasionally be a curse, rather than a blessing, and tonight was one of those times, as he lay awake and pondered all the alien diseases she might have.

The old, analog alarm clock they’d found in a charity shop blared loudly at 6:00 the next morning, yanking Martha forcibly from her slumber. She swore under her breath as she stumbled out of bed and into the bathroom. She supposed there would be fun parts of their stay in 1969, but right now, standing under the lukewarm trickle of the shower with her hair in a shower cap, she couldn’t think of any of them.

The morning went from bad to worse. She stubbed her toe on her bed while she was getting dressed, spilled milk on the counter while making breakfast, and then—finally—burnt her tongue on hot coffee.

The cursing that erupted from her lips at that point was enough to draw the Doctor out of his and Rose’s room. “Martha? Everything all right?”

“Oh yeah, just dandy,” she drawled, laying the sarcasm on thick. “I’m having a brilliant morning—thanks for asking.”

He glanced back into the bedroom, then stepped into the living room and carefully shut the door. “Anything I can do?”

Martha was almost upset enough to launch into a sarcastic tirade about how he could stop insisting she work in a shop and maybe do something himself for once. But Martha the peacekeeper, Martha the middle child who’d held her family together after her parents’ divorce, reared up just in time.
She scowled into her cup of coffee. “No,” she said, her voice sullen. And it was true. There wasn’t anything he could do.

The Doctor ran his hand through his hair and looked back at his bedroom. Martha then remembered Rose’s odd behaviour. “How is she?”

“She literally fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.” He crossed his arms over his chest and stared at the floor. “I always thought that was just a saying, but I watched her do it.”

Martha frowned. “And she’s still sleeping?”

He nodded.

“She took a nap yesterday afternoon after we went shopping.”

“And she slept longer on our first night in the flat, too.”

“You’re afraid she’s ill.”

He paced the length of the living room. “What else could be causing this? Rose hasn’t needed regular human sleep in a year and a half. Four, maybe five hours a night and that’s it. And suddenly she’s sleeping over ten hours a day and is still exhausted?”

He slumped and rubbed his hands over his face. “What if she’s really ill, and I can’t… And I can’t get to the TARDIS to take care of her.”

Martha’s own complaints about their stay in 1969—though still irritating and valid—paled in comparison to the Doctor’s desperation. She reached out and grabbed his hand.

“Hey, you read the transcript, yeah? Rose shows up in the recording, so we know…”

She shrugged weakly, not wanting to actually voice the possibility that Rose could die, even if she’d be saying it to negate it.

The Doctor nodded slowly. “You’re right. Thank you, Martha. I hadn’t thought of that.”

Martha looked at her soggy bowl of cereal and sighed. “I’d better get going,” she said.

“Don’t forget the psychic paper.” The Doctor rummaged in his coat pocket and handed the slim leather wallet to her. “Just think of what you want people to see, and that’s what’ll appear.”

Rose groaned and rolled over when the sunlight hit her face, pulling the duvet over her head. She’d been asleep for… eight hours, she figured, but she felt like she hadn’t slept a wink.

“Rose?” the Doctor said. “How are you feeling, love?”

“Like I’ve been run over by a lorry,” Rose grumbled. “Lemme sleep.”

To her displeasure, he pulled the duvet out of her fingers and down over her face. “I wish I could, Rose, but I’m getting worried about how tired you are. I’d like to do some scans with the sonic, if that’s all right with you.”

Rose pried an eye open. “You managed to sit there all night without scanning me?”
He tugged on his ear. “Well, I might have done one, just to make sure you weren’t dying. But I wanted to wait until you were awake and we could talk.”

“M not awake,” she mumbled, trying to burrow back underneath the covers.

“Come on, Rose,” the Doctor cajoled. “Wouldn’t you like to find out why you’re so tired? If we figure out why, we might be able to fix it.”

That did sound appealing, so she reluctantly let go of the covers and pushed herself into an upright position. “Fine,” she agreed. “But only if it means I can go back to sleep when you’re done.”

The Doctor pressed his lips together, and Rose realised he was more concerned than she’d picked up on. That cleared some of the grogginess from her mind, and she managed to smile at him.

“It’s probably something like jet lag,” she told him as he scanned. “How many decades did we pass through when the Angel sent us back here?”

“Almost four,” he replied as he ran the sonic over her in multiple passes.

“Decade lag, then,” she decided, then yawned so big her jaw cracked.

The Doctor set the sonic down and looked at her. “Except why is it only affecting you and not Martha or me?”


“Thanks, love,” he said drily.

Rose rolled her eyes and pushed her hair out of her face. “I just mean you’ve centuries more experience at this than me.”

The Doctor chuckled and kissed her knuckles. “I know what you meant, but it was too perfect an opportunity to pass up.”

“Are those tests done yet?” Rose asked. “I wanna go back to bed.”

The Doctor glanced at the sonic screwdriver, and his eyes widened. “Oh. Well. Oh. I guess that does make some sense.”

“What? What makes sense?” She peered over the Doctor’s shoulder, but couldn’t make heads nor tails of the results. “It’s decade lag, isn’t it?”

“In a manner of speaking,” the Doctor said, typically vague. “It’s the TARDIS.”

“What do you mean, it’s the TARDIS? She isn’t here.”

“And that’s the problem,” the Doctor agreed. “You and her… I have a feeling you’re more connected than she’s ever let on.”

Rose rubbed at her forehead. “Please, Doctor, just explain it to me. I’m too tired to follow your cryptic rambling today.” She felt badly when his shoulders slumped, but he was making her nervous and she just wanted to go back to sleep.

“Well. Remember when we met Donna? Or rather, why we met Donna?”
Almost a year had passed, but Rose quickly figured out what he meant. “You mean, the… huon particles?”

“That’s right. Yours came from the heart of the TARDIS, and as long as you’re somewhat close to her, she helps hold them in stasis. When you aren’t together…”

Rose’s mouth went dry. “Doctor! You told Donna huon particles were deadly!”

“Oh no, love.”

The Doctor sent a wave of reassurance over the bond. After Rose relaxed, she realised the Doctor would have been much more upset if her life were at stake.

“Okay, so what is it then?”

“Huon particles take a tremendous amount of energy to maintain. When we’re at home, or at least close to her, the TARDIS lends you some of her energy. Without her…”

“I’m having to do all the work myself,” Rose finished. She sank back into her pillows. “So does that mean I’ll be tied to the TARDIS for the rest of my life? Not that I ever plan to leave, but what would happen if we were separated somehow?”

The Doctor nodded soberly. “I think we’re about to find out exactly what would happen.”

It was the first side effect of Bad Wolf that was truly a downside, and Rose looked for the silver lining. If there’s always TARDIS energy in me… Martha teases that she listens to me better than she does to the Doctor. “This is why I can talk to her so easily, isn’t it?”

The Doctor winked at her. “Go ahead and say what you’re thinking, Rose—this is why you’re closer to her than I am. Why you’re a better pilot than I am,” he admitted.

His dramatic sigh pulled a giggle from Rose, but then another thought occurred to her, and she frowned. “Hang on. Does that mean I’m going to feel like this the whole time we’re in 1969? Because I’m not gonna lie, Doctor—I feel horrid.”

He brushed her hair back over her ear. “I know you do, love. I’m afraid you’ll be pretty low energy as long as we’re here. There isn’t really much we can do about that.”

oOoOoOoOo

Martha sat down at a small table in a teashop and let the fake smile she’d been forcing drop. She’d been out for four hours and hadn’t even gotten a nibble. The Doctor’s idea of using the psychic paper for her CV had sounded good until she’d realised it would only take one phone call for a manager to discover it was a pack of lies. Without experience or references, even the few shops that were hiring hadn’t been interested.

“What can I get you, love?”

The kindly voice pulled Martha out of her morose thoughts, and she looked up at the older black woman smiling down at her. “A job?” She laughed weakly.

The waitress held up her order pad. “Let’s start with lunch, and then we’ll see where we can go from there.”

Martha glanced at the menu quickly and ordered a sandwich and tea, and the woman smiled and
disappeared into the kitchen. To Martha’s surprise, she returned a few minutes later with a pot of tea and two cups.

“Do you mind if I sit with you for a minute?” she asked. “I might be able to help you find a job, but I’d like to talk with you first, before I send you off somewhere.”

For the first time since they’d arrived in 1969, genuine hope crept over Martha. “Oh, that would be brilliant,” she said, trying to sound grateful but not desperate. “My family are travelling, so I’m on my own for a few months and I need to find something fast.”

“Well, introductions first.” The woman held out a ring-laden hand for Martha to shake. “I’m Gladys.”

“Martha. Martha Jones.”

After they shook hands, Gladys turned the two cups right side up and set them on their saucers. “How do you take your tea, Martha?”

“Lemon and honey, please.”

Gladys poured the tea, adding milk to her own cup, then looked at Martha. “What kind of experience do you have?” she asked.

Martha sighed. “I’ve never had to work before,” she explained. “My family are pretty well-off, but like I said, they’re gone right now, and I’d like to save money for when I move out on my own…” She sipped at her tea and tried to think of life experiences she could translate into work. “My mum does a lot of entertaining,” she said slowly. “For my dad’s work. And I’m always there with her, talking to people, keeping the conversation going.”

Gladys smiled. “Being good with people translates well into lots of lines of work,” she encouraged Martha. “What about what you’d really like to do, if you could do anything?”

Martha sat up. “I want to be a doctor,” she said. That zeal hadn’t diminished in her travels with the Doctor. If anything, the unique physiologies they’d come across had only fed the desire. “I like being able to come in and help people.”

“And do you know what kind of work you’d like to do right now, until you get through school?”

Martha managed a small, but genuine smile. “I thought I’d work in a shop. I can’t be too choosy if I don’t have anything on my CV, can I?”

Gladys laughed. “You’ve got a good head on your shoulders,” she praised. “I happen to know of a manager that’s hiring. If you’re interested, I could give him a ring and get you an interview for this afternoon.”

“Oh, that would be fantastic, thank you!” Martha said. When she left an hour later, it was with a full belly, a job interview, and a genuine smile on her face.

Her positive attitude had drooped by her second day on the job. It had only taken one snooty customer in ladies’ apparel to remind Martha that this was not the life she’d planned for herself. Tidying up the blouses after the woman flounced out of the store with an attitude to match Annalise at her worst was enough to sour her mood, and then she had to listen to the other shop girls talk about their boyfriends and their plans for the weekend when she didn’t have anything to share.
“Hey, Martha,” one of them said as they walked out of the shop. “You should come with us tonight. It’s gonna be a blast.”

Martha was half-tempted, but finally shook her head. “My flatmates would worry,” she said truthfully. “We don’t have a phone, so I couldn’t let them know where we are.”

“How do you not have a phone?” another asked incredulously. “Look, let me write down where we’ll be, and if you get home and change your mind, you can come out with us.”

Martha dutifully accepted the note, then waved goodbye and headed off in the opposite direction. She was halfway to the bus stop when she changed her mind and walked past it to the tube station instead, taking a very familiar route. A voice in the back of her head told her she would regret what she was about to do, but she just needed to see something that looked like home.

The sun was setting forty-five minutes later as she walked from the tube station up the long hill to the house that would one day belong to her parents. At first, she was too caught up in the way the late evening light hit the leaves on the trees and the roofs, casting a golden glow on everything. But halfway up the hill, she felt eyes on her and realised every person she’d seen so far had been white.

She straightened her shoulders and continued on, but the joy in the journey seeped out of her with every questioning look. To these people, a black girl didn’t belong in a middle-class neighbourhood. No one seemed threatening, but there was a very obvious vibe of, “you shouldn’t be here.”

In the end, she only took a quick glance at the house she’d grown up in. It didn’t look like home. Her instincts earlier had been right—she regretted coming. With a sigh, she turned and walked briskly back down the street. At the foot of the hill, she caught the bus that would take her back to the flat she shared with the Doctor and Rose.
The Doctor was acutely aware that both Rose and Martha were miserable. He did what he could to smooth out their lives as much as possible—keeping the flat clean, doing the laundry and the shopping, letting them choose what to watch in the evenings—and then he tried to stay out of their way. He even ignored Martha’s digs at him, understanding she just needed someone to blame for her situation.

He didn’t anticipate Rose’s unwillingness to let that go, though in retrospect, he should have. If the situations were reversed, he never would have let someone pick at Rose the way Martha was picking at him.

Still, it was a complete surprise when after Martha made yet another snide remark about his inability to get them home over breakfast, Rose carefully set her mug down and looked at her. “I think I’ll walk with you to work this morning, Martha. I need to get some things at the market anyway.”

The Doctor looked at Rose, quickly taking in the fire in her eyes and the stubborn set to her jaw. He glanced over at Martha, who was pushing food around on her plate and hadn’t picked up on the warning signs Rose was clearly displaying.

Martha shrugged. “Yeah, whatever. I’ll be ready to go in fifteen minutes.” She disappeared into the loo and the shower started a moment later.

“Rose, I can go to the market,” the Doctor protested. “You shouldn’t be exerting yourself.”

She lowered her eyebrows and glared at him. “Doctor, this is not about the market and you know it. I’ve put up with her constant sniping and subtle accusations for a week, and I can’t take it anymore. An’ if she makes one more comment about working in a shop…”

_Oooohh…_ Somehow, that was a connection he _hadn’t_ made, probably because he’d been trying to ignore Martha’s sarcasm. That did change things—he didn’t need Rose to defend him, but he wouldn’t stop her from defending herself.

The Doctor nodded. “Just make sure you don’t wear yourself out.”

She rolled her eyes. “The store is two streets down. I’ll have a short chat with Martha, pick up milk and eggs, and come home. That’s not going to do any lasting damage.”

Rose tried to pace the flat while waiting for Martha, but the Doctor convinced her to sit with him on the sofa while he explained what he was going to do with the timey-wimey device that day.

“I’ve almost got the ding to work properly!” he said, holding it up proudly.

“That’s great, Doctor.” She kept glancing at the bathroom door—the shower had turned off five minutes ago. Finally, Martha stepped out, dressed in a skirt and a nice blouse.

“Ready?” Rose asked her.

She picked up her handbag. “Not really, but I guess I don’t have a choice. Let’s go.”

Rose pressed her lips into a thin line and followed Martha out of the flat, pulling on her jacket to protect against the morning chill.
They’d only gotten as far as the street when Martha said, “Okay, so what did you want to talk about without the Doctor overhearing?”

Rose crossed her arms over her chest. “Well, it would be nice if you would stop guilting him for our situation every chance you get,” she said, not bothering to put on a nice tone of voice.

Martha stopped in the middle of the pavement and stared at her. “You’ve got to be kidding me,” she said furiously. “We’re stuck in 1969 for months, I’m working in a shop, and you want me to lay off your husband?”

“Considering this isn’t actually his fault, yeah!” Rose exclaimed.

Martha threw her hands up in the air. “How is this not his fault?” she challenged Rose.

Rose was ready for that question, though, and she fired off her answers. “Did he put the Weeping Angels there? Did he take us to Wester Drumlins knowing what was causing those odd readings? Did he force either of us to go with him?”

“No, but—”

“No.” Rose cut her off with a slash of her arm through the air. “I’ve spent three and a half years trying to convince him that he is not to blame for every negative thing that happens to take place in his general vicinity. I am so proud of him for not feeling guilty over this, and I’ll not have you undoing all that work.”

Martha glanced away, but didn’t say anything.

“And also,” Rose said, her temper rising when Martha refused to budge, “there’s nothing wrong with working in a shop. I worked in a shop, until I met the Doctor.”

Her friend’s gaze swung around to meet hers. “You worked in a shop? But you’re brilliant, Rose.”

Rose smiled bitterly. “And maybe some of those coworkers you refuse to spend any time with are too. Working a low-paying job doesn’t mean you can’t be intelligent. It means you’re in a situation where that’s what’s available to you. That might be because you need a second job to support a new baby, or it might be because you chose to leave school without A-levels to live with the boyfriend you were so sure was the love of your life.”

Martha looked down at the pavement, and some of Rose’s anger faded. “Look, I know this isn’t what you’re used to, and it isn’t the glamorous kind of adventure you reckoned on when you came with us, but it isn’t easy for any of us. You have no idea what it feels like for us to be away from the TARDIS.”

“I’m trapped away from home, too,” Martha pointed out.

Rose started to answer, but she finally caught a passer-by staring at them and realised they were having this argument—a rather revealing conversation—in the middle of a busy street. “You know it’s more than that for us.” She raised an eyebrow. “I mean, we told you it’s why I’m tired all the time, and that’s only part of why we miss her.”

Martha’s face turned a dull shade of red. “Yeah, I know.”

“I just… Do you know how much I wish I could trade places with you? Instead, I’m stuck at home all day and the Doctor is treating me like I’m made of glass. And I can’t even argue, because deep down I know he’s right! I can’t do much, and I hate it.”
“I’m sorry.”

Rose sighed and ran her hand through her hair. “We’ve all been a bit on edge. But we’ll get by, yeah? I mean, the report Sally wrote up says the TARDIS disappeared from Wester Drumlins, and I can’t imagine her going anywhere but back to the Doctor and me, so we just have to wait it out.”

She looked at her friend. “So for now, could you just relax the hostile attitude? I promise you, the Doctor is doing everything he can to get us home as soon as possible.”

Martha nodded. “I’m sorry. I know I’ve been hard to live with ever since we got here. It’s just, the thought of being stuck permanently in 1969 honestly terrifies me. I’m not like you, Rose. I don’t want to run away from my life to live in the TARDIS forever. I like my job, I like my school, I miss my family…”

Rose’s voice lost its bite. “I know, I get it. You’ve definitely got plenty of reason to be upset. Working in a shop is hard—I know that better than anyone. If you ever want to rant, I’m there for you, as long as you promise to listen to me whine when I’m sick of being tired all the time.”

Martha finally smiled. “You’ve got it,” she said. “And now, I really do need to get to work.”

“Hey, look,” Rose said, grabbing Martha’s elbow before she could walk away. She pointed at the pub on the opposite corner. “Pub quiz tomorrow night. What do you think, you and me?”

“Absolutely!” Martha threw her arms around Rose and whispered, “Thanks for listening,” then dashed off towards her bus stop.

oOoOoOoOo

The Doctor was relieved when a much calmer, happier Rose returned to the flat with the groceries an hour after she left with a vague explanation that she and Martha had “talked things out.” When Martha had a smile on her face when she walked in the door that evening, he thought that maybe, just maybe, they’d make it through their exile.

The next night after dinner, he watched with some bemusement while Rose changed into jeans after dinner and joined Martha in the living room. “Ready to go?”

“Go where?” he asked, looking from Rose to Martha and back again. “What are you doing?”

“When we walked past the pub yesterday, we found out it’s pub quiz night,” Rose answered. “We thought we’d go, see if we can’t make a few friends.”

That did not sound like a good idea, not at all. Rose was weaker than she would admit, even to herself, and he was afraid she was going to push herself too far in this unrealistic desire to prove that she wasn’t really that affected by the absence of the TARDIS. “Why don’t you stay here with me?” he suggested. “I could use a hand with the timey-wimey detector.”

Rose raised an eyebrow. “Doctor, I’m going barmy stuck in here all day. Look, I promise I’ll be careful. The pub is only two streets down—I walked that far and back yesterday without any difficulty. If I get too tired, I’ll ask you to come help me home. But please, you’ve got to let me out of the flat.”

She smiled up at him, a hint of her cheeky humour in her eyes, and he knew she’d picked up on his concern. “You could always come with us, if you’re worried.”

For a moment, he was tempted. But he knew she hated to be coddled, so he was trying to balance his
desire to keep her as healthy as possible while they were stuck on Earth with her need for some independence.

The Doctor shook his head. “Too much to do here,” he said, gesturing to the bits and bobs scattered around the living room. “I need to get this timey-wimey detector done as soon as possible.” He waved goodbye with the sonic screwdriver. “Have fun, and remember, if you have a question you can’t answer, you can always phone a friend.” He tapped his temple.

Martha rolled her eyes. “Yeah, that’s cheating,” she pointed out. “If you want to help out, you’ll have to come with us.” When he didn’t move, she looked at Rose. “You ready?”

“Yeah, just a sec.” Rose crossed the room and bent down to kiss his cheek, then she and Martha were gone.

Rose sighed in relief when they were finally out of the flat. She tipped her head back to catch the last rays of the evening sun and shoved her hands into her jacket pockets. “For a moment, I thought he was going to insist I stay at home.”

“He’s just worried about you,” Martha said.

Rose hated how reasonable she sounded. She wrinkled her nose. “I’m tired of being worried about.”

“You’re just plain tired,” Martha corrected. “On Wednesday, you had to take a nap after your shower.”

“That was a one-off,” Rose protested. “I forgot the hot water makes me so much more tired right now.”

“And two days ago, you did the dishes and then had to sit down on the sofa for an hour to rest.”

“You sound like the Doctor.”

“I just don’t think you really understand how serious your exhaustion is.” Martha stopped, and Rose reluctantly turned and looked at her. “Listen, I get it Rose. Believe me, I understand how frustrated you must be. But exhaustion can affect your health in ways you don’t even realise. Erratic blood sugar levels, headaches, mood swings, a weakened immune system… Sleep isn’t actually for the weak.”

Rose stared at the pavement, and a moment later, she heard Martha sigh in exasperation.

“So yeah, we’re worried about you—because it’s a big deal. Plus, imagine what it’s like from the Doctor’s point of view, watching the woman he loves sort of… fade into a pale imitation of yourself.”

Rose gasped when Martha managed to hit on her most vulnerable spot. Was she still herself, if she couldn’t do everything she was used to doing?

“I’m not a pale imitation! I’m me, the real me. I’m just a tired version of me.” She swiped at her stinging eyes.

“Hey, hey.” Martha put a hand on her shoulder. “I know you’re still you. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that.” She glanced across the street. “Come on, let’s go have some fun, yeah?”
Only, as it turned out, pub quiz isn’t a lot of fun when everything except the history questions were 38 years old from your point of view. After a few rounds, they gave up and just settled back with a second pint.

“You know,” Martha said, “1969 isn’t bad, really. I don’t think I’d mind spending an extended amount of time here, if I knew for sure how and when we’d be leaving.”

Rose nodded. “And you just got over being stuck in 1913. I’d promise to take you someplace fantastic later as a thank you, but I’m starting to think those trips are cursing us. Who knows what year we’d get stuck in next?”

“The only year I want to spend an extended amount of time in is 2008,” Martha said fervently.

Rose got a funny look on her face at that. “I have a feeling that will be our next long term stop.”

Something hard settled in Martha’s stomach. She wasn’t ready to go home, not yet… but the way Rose had phrased that didn’t sound like that was what she meant. Whatever Rose could feel coming, Martha wasn’t sure she wanted to be a part of it.

“Come on,” she said, poking Rose in the side with her elbow. “Enough gloom and doom talk. Your glass is empty, and so’s mine. I’ll get us another round.”

The Doctor nearly changed his mind about joining Rose and Martha several times, but each time he reached for his coat, he remembered the look in Rose’s eyes when she’d practically begged for an evening out of the flat. Rose wasn’t meant for a domestic life any more than he was, and of the three of them, she was the most trapped right now. He could let her have this night out without hovering over her.

But when they still hadn’t returned at 10:30, his resolve was tested. Rose hadn’t been up this late since their first night in 1969.

Finally he heard shuffling footsteps shortly after 11:00, followed by failed attempts to insert the key in the lock. He raised his eyebrows and crossed the room to open the door for them. A half-sober Martha was supporting a completely drunk Rose, and she mumbled thanks when the Doctor swiftly reached for Rose and swept her into his arms.

Rose looked at him blearily. “Doctor! Doctor, you know ‘m the real me, righ’?” she asked plaintively.

“Of course you’re the real you, Rose,” he told her as he carried her into their room.

His reassurance didn’t calm her. “I am!” she wailed. “’M not an im… im’tation.”

Her agitation might have been exacerbated by the alcohol in her system, but the distress radiating over the bond was genuine. After he’d helped her change into her nightgown, the Doctor took her face gently between his hands and brushed his thumbs over her cheekbones.

“You are the absolute original Rose Tyler, he promised her. I’d never mistake you for anyone else.

She finally smiled up at him, her anxiety clearing away as quickly and inexplicably as it had arrived. The Doctor dropped a kiss onto her forehead and watched for a moment as she drifted off to sleep.

Martha was still in the living room, and the Doctor raised his eyebrows. “I don’t suppose you can
explain where that outburst came from?” he asked.

She groaned. “I might have said—I was trying to get her to understand why she needs to take it easy. And I might have said something about how hard it was for you to watch her fade into a pale imitation of herself.”

The Doctor had to physically bite his tongue to hold back the diatribe he wanted to bring down on Martha’s head for that. She’d been trying to help, he knew that. But he knew Rose, and he knew exactly what would happen next. She’d wake up the next day even more determined than before to prove that she was still her old self, and any attempts he made to get her to slow down or take it easy would be seen as proof that he thought she was just an imitation of herself.

“I’m sorry,” Martha whispered finally.

“I know you are, Martha,” the Doctor agreed wearily. “I just hope this doesn’t end up going as badly as I’m afraid it will.”

Rose woke up the next morning with a pounding headache and a mouth that felt like she’d been eating sawdust. She groaned and pulled the duvet up to block the light, but the dark didn’t help her head.

*There’s paracetamol on your bedside table,* the Doctor told her, and she cautiously pushed herself up in bed and took the pills, draining the glass of water he’d left with them.

Thanks to the water, the worst of the pain abated after a few minutes. When she felt like she could move without wanting to physically remove her own head, she shuffled into the living room.

“Oh thanks for the pills,” she told the Doctor. Her voice came out as a croak, and she winced and cleared her throat. “I haven’t been that drunk since the time Jack insisted I try hypervodka.”

The Doctor laughed quietly. “I think you were worse off then than you were last night.” He stood up and walked into the kitchen. “Can I make you breakfast? Tea and toast?”

“Ta.” Rose brushed a caress along the bond and sat down on the sofa. “So, normally I’d ask if I did anything embarrassing last night, but I’m pretty sure Martha and I didn’t really talk to anyone else.”

“She didn’t mention anything,” the Doctor said.

There was an odd quality to his voice that told Rose he was withholding something from her, and she waited a minute. The kettle boiled, and he pulled it off the burner quickly enough that the whistle didn’t bother her. Once he’d poured the water, he leaned against the counter and looked at her from the kitchen.

“You did say something though… about not being an imitation.”

Rose sighed. She really didn’t want another explanation on how she needed to take care of herself, how she shouldn’t push herself because she didn’t have her usual strength.

“Look, Doctor…”

“Let me go first?”

She hesitated, then nodded her head.
He brought her tea and a plate of toast and sat down next to her on the sofa. “There is not a single thing that could happen to you physically that would make you less than the real Rose Tyler. Your blonde hair and brown eyes don’t make you Rose, and neither does your ability to run with me.”

Rose bit her lip. “Yeah?”

The Doctor smiled and tugged on a strand of her hair. “This is my tenth face. I know a little about being the same person, no matter what I’m like physically.”

She was quiet while she ate her toast, and he let her think over what he’d told her. Finally, she gave him a real smile.

“Just as long as you don’t say it’s improvement if I end up with no head.”

He laughed. “I would never!”

To his pleasure, Rose set her empty plate down on the coffee table and reclined against his chest. She held her teacup in one hand, and traced patterns over his knee with the other. When his fingers started absentmindedly running through her hair, she turned her head slightly to get him to press on the pressure points just behind her eyes.

“Headache still?” he asked, massaging circles on her forehead.

“Yeah. It’ll go away soon, though. Tell me about what you’re going to do today.”

The Doctor looked at the pile of electrical bits strewn around the living room. “I’m almost done with the timey-wimey detector,” he told her. “I think I figured out what part it’s missing, so I’ll go out to the shops this afternoon and see if I can find something that’ll work.”

“That’s good!” she said. “One step closer to getting home.”

oOoOoOoOo

After breakfast the next day, the Doctor declared the timey-wimey detector ready to be tested. Martha clapped for him, and Rose grabbed him and kissed him soundly. The Doctor beamed at them both, then bounced around the flat, gathering the device and spare bits and parts to do repairs on the fly if he needed to.

Rose sighed and shoved the feeling of being useless down as far as she could. Martha had her job and the Doctor was working to get them home, and she got to sit in the flat. Alone.

The Doctor looked at Rose, traces of guilt in his expression. “I’ll only be out for a few hours,” he told Rose. “If this works, maybe we could go to a park or something to celebrate.”

She nodded and pushed on the middle of his back. “I’ll be fine here alone for the morning,” she told him. “Now go!”

She and Martha laughed when he took off running down the stairs, drawing shouts from some of their neighbours. Even the ones who were used to the Doctor by now did not approve of his exuberant personality.

“I’m surprised we haven’t gotten a noise complaint,” Martha commented.

Rose bit back a grin. “I’m pretty sure the Doctor used the psychic paper to convince the landlord that he’s someone important.”
Martha shook her head. “He probably did—and he gave you a bad time for using your sonic to open the gate at Wester Drumlins.”

She got to her feet and started cleaning up after breakfast. Watching her, Rose felt more helpless than she had in a long time. Was her life actually pathetic enough that she wished she could wash the dishes?

“Are you working this morning, Martha?” she asked as her friend put the dishes away.

“Yeah, but then I’m off for two days. Two days in a row!”

Rose laughed. “I remember how rare that could be. Maybe we’ll be able to do something while you’re off—go for a day trip or something. We shouldn’t be stuck in London the whole time.”

Martha looked at her, and Rose set her jaw. “I’m not an invalid,” she said, her voice a little testier than normal.

Her friend’s noncommittal shrug wasn’t the answer she was looking for, and Rose was still stewing half an hour later when Martha left for the day. Her head ached, and that made her more irritable than usual. She wandered the flat looking for something to do, but not even the stack of novels the Doctor had purchased for her looked appealing.

The library is less than a mile away, she realised. I could get there and back before the Doctor gets home, and then I’d have something new to read.

She knew what the Doctor and Martha would think about her plan, but frankly, she didn’t care. This was still her body, and she could choose to take it easy or not. And if she wore herself out and had to rest more for the rest of the week, the chance to get out and spend some time by herself was worth it.

They’d started leaving the psychic paper on the kitchen counter in case anyone needed it. Rose snagged it and a copy of the lease and left the flat, moving faster than she had in weeks. We’d better not run into any hostile aliens while we’re here, because there’s no way I can run for my life, she grumbled to herself as she reached the bus stop.

The solitary bench was vacant, but Rose was too keyed up to sit down. She paced the kerb for five minutes and had nearly decided to walk when the bus pulled up just in time. She smiled brightly at the driver as she paid, then sank into a seat gratefully.

This isn’t because I’m an invalid, she told herself as she rested her head against the window. No reason to waste energy on walking when I can take the bus.

The other passengers looked at her a little funny when she pushed the stop button only five minutes after getting on the bus in the first place, but Rose ignored them. The bus lumbered to a stop at the corner nearest the library, and she jumped lightly from the vehicle and walked into the building.

Her pace had slowed considerably by the time she reached it, and she was grateful to sit down with a magazine while she rested. Normally, she wouldn’t have appreciated the hard, wooden chair, but today she had a feeling that if she were sitting somewhere comfortable, she’d probably fall asleep. As it was, when the sun shifted to shine directly on her, she had to make herself move so she wouldn’t drift off.

Her head swam when she stood up and her legs felt like they were made of lead. It’s okay, she told herself. You just need to rest again, catch your breath.

She sat back down, but the more time went by, the worse she felt. After ten minutes, she shuffled
slowly out of the library and back towards the bus stop.

She was halfway there when the world spun around her. Rose grabbed onto a convenient signpost and waited until she could see clearly again to answer the Doctor’s frantic query.

*I’m fine,* she told him, then immediately corrected that to a more truthful, *Well, not fine maybe, but nothing really wrong. Just tired and… could you come get me?*

*Where are you, love?*

Rose looked around and spotted a cafe on the corner. She walked towards it slowly, explaining the location to the Doctor as she went.

The only obstacle to testing the timey-wimey detector was the lack of odd temporal activity in 1969 London. How was he supposed to find out if it worked properly when everything he pointed it at actually belonged in this place and time?

After a fruitless hour, the Doctor started pointing his gadget at anything and everything, just hoping for some kind of reaction. Time travellers passed through London all the time. *I pass through London all the time,* he amended. Surely something would set it off.

Thirty minutes later, he was staring at the remains of a chicken in disbelief. “Oi! You there!” a man shouted, shaking his fist. “What are you doing to my birds?”

“Uh… nothing! Nothing at all!” the Doctor stammered, backing away from the angry man. “It must have been… um, the heat. Yep, chickens can do that, explode in the heat. You never know when it’s going to happen.”

He turned tail and ran before the man could grasp the tiny detail that it was only 25C, not nearly hot enough to explode any kind of farm animal.

“All right,” he muttered as he waited for the bus that would take him home. “Do not use the timey-wimey detector near chickens. But it might be useful for fixing egg mayonnaise sandwiches.”

All thoughts of chickens and timey-wimey devices evaporated when he felt a rush of panic and disorientation from Rose. After her evident frustration the other night, he’d tried not to hover over her, no matter how easy the bond made it to do just that. But this sharp shift in emotion was impossible to miss.

He barely managed to hold onto the fragile device, and he shoved it into his coat pocket with shaking hands. Then he took off in Rose’s direction, not sure what was wrong.

He’d just flagged a taxi down when some of the disorientation cleared and she was able to communicate again. *I’m fine,* she assured him. *Well, not fine maybe, but nothing really wrong. Just tired and… could you come get me?*

*Where are you, love?* She named an address that was almost a mile from their flat, and he gritted his teeth. *What were you doing out that far?* he asked before he could stop himself.

*I wanted to go to the library, but I was so tired by the time I got here, even though I took the bus, that I couldn’t enjoy myself.*

The regretful quality to her answer—lacking any resentment at all—worried him more than the
words themselves. “Can you hurry up?” the Doctor asked the cabbie. “My wife is ill.”

The man glanced at him in the rearview mirror. “How do you know that, then?”

“She called me at work, asked me to come pick her up at the cafe she went to for lunch.”

“Want me to wait while you go in and get her?” The car sped up a little.

“That would be brilliant, thank you.”

The Doctor tapped his leg while the London streets flew by. Rose’s mind had quieted to the point that it felt like she had fallen asleep. Much as he wanted her to rest, the fact that she would allow herself to drift off in public hinted that she was feeling worse than she’d let on.

The car slowed to a stop in front of a greasy spoon at the address Rose had given him. The Doctor found Rose in a booth with her head resting against the seat back and her eyes closed, with an untouched cup of tea on the table in front of her.

She blinked and looked at him with glassy eyes. “You’re here already?”

“I think you fell asleep,” he told her, swiftly taking inventory of her appearance and noticing the red spots on her cheeks that completed her feverish appearance. “Come on, let’s go home, Rose.” He rummaged in his pocket and dropped a half-crown onto the table to cover the bill, then helped her to her feet.

“Oh good, you’ve got a cab,” she mumbled as they got into the car. “I don’t think I could have walked all the way home.”

The Doctor pulled her close and gave the cabbie their address, trying not to let on how sick he suspected Rose was. Her body temperature was always warm to him, but right now, he could feel an unnatural heat burning through her clothes and his to warm his skin.

“Here we are then, sir,” the cabbie said ten minutes later when he stopped in front of their building. “Take care of the missus, all right?”

“I will.” The Doctor handed him a twenty pound note. “As thanks for your help,” he said sincerely when the man tried to protest the extravagant tip.

“You’re more than welcome, sir.”

The Doctor helped Rose out of the car and closed the door, then scooped her up into his arms, dropping all pretence of this being normal tiredness.

“Mmmmm, the knight in shining armour treatment,” Rose teased, though her voice slurred the words.

“That’s right,” the Doctor agreed as he carried her up the stairs. “Though typically princesses don’t put themselves in danger. Why’d you go out, Rose?”

She scoffed. “Was tired of bein’ home all the time, or only goin’ out with you an’ Martha. Wanted to do something by myself for a change.”

The Doctor sighed; he could certainly understand the feeling, but the impulse was going to cost her.

“Can you pull my sonic screwdriver out of my pocket and unlock the door?” he asked when they reached their flat. Rose fumbled a bit, but thankfully, the unlock function was one they used so much she could almost do it in her sleep.
“M’hot, Doctor,” she complained when he set her down on the bed.

“Come on, let’s get you into your pyjamas and then I’ll take your temperature.” The Doctor helped Rose out of her shirt and bra, then into a loose cotton pyjama top. Rose managed to tug her skirt off and slide under the covers while he reached for his sonic again.

Her eyes were drifting shut when he adjusted the settings, and he shook her shoulder. “I need you to stay awake for just a few more minutes, Rose,” he told her as he checked her temperature. His jaw tightened when he read the results. 39C. A more detailed scan confirmed that she had the flu, but he still wanted to find out what symptoms she’d experienced.

“Jus’ wanna sleep,” she mumbled.

“And you will, as soon as you tell me a little more about how you’re feeling.” He hated to do it, but he prodded her telepathically, urging her to stay awake just for a moment longer.

Her right eye cracked open and she glared up at him. “All righ’,” she grumbled. “Fine. What do you want to know?”

“Tell me how you felt when you were at the library.”


“But you weren’t short of breath?” he pressed.

She tried to shake her head, but just lolled on the pillow.

“All right, love. Get some sleep.”

Rose latched onto his hand. “Stay with me?”

The Doctor would have laughed if circumstances were different. He had no intention of leaving Rose’s side. “Of course,” he promised, quickly changing into his own pyjamas. He slid into bed, sitting upright with his back against a pile of pillows. Rose immediately rolled so her head was in his lap, and the Doctor tangled his fingers in her hair, encouraging her to sleep.

Once he was certain she was out, he reached carefully for his sonic screwdriver and scanned her again, looking for any hints of complications from the illness. Influenza A was not just the simple stomach virus people sometimes meant when they said they had the flu. It was a virulent disease that could cause a whole range of respiratory issues.

Normally, the artron energy in Rose’s body would be enough of a boost to her immune system to keep her from getting such a common illness. But the additional strain of her current condition…

He breathed a sigh of relief when her lungs seemed clear. If they were lucky, Rose might avoid the worst complications associated with the flu.

oOoOoOoOo

Martha was surprised when she walked into a dark flat at 7:00. “Rose? Doctor?” she called as she flipped the lights on. The kitchen hadn’t been touched since breakfast, and her stomach growled, her hunger making itself known now that it was obvious dinner wasn’t ready.

A door opened and shut quietly behind her, and her eyes widened when she turned around and saw
the Doctor dressed in pyjamas. “Sorry I didn’t get around to making supper,” he said, keeping his voice low. “Rose has the flu, and I haven’t left our room all afternoon.”

“You should take her to the doctor tomorrow so she can get Tamiflu,” Martha told him, her training making the answer automatic.

“I would, if we weren’t stuck in bloody 1969,” he spat out.

Martha closed her eyes and groaned. Of course. Antiviral medications weren’t approved for use on the flu until the end of the 1990s. “Damn it,” she muttered. “I’m sorry, Doctor.”

He sighed and leaned back against the wall. “It’s not your fault.”

“Can I check on her?” Martha asked.

The Doctor shook his head. “Why don’t you go get us dinner?” he suggested instead, retrieving his wallet from his coat pocket and handing her a crisp ten pound note.

Martha shoved the money into her pocket. “Fish and chips?” she asked.

“Yeah.” He glanced back at his bedroom door. “I’ll heat up some soup for Rose while you’re out.”

Martha fretted the whole time she was gone. This was exactly what she’d been most worried about, given Rose’s extreme exhaustion. The flu wasn’t just a kiddie illness—it could cause serious problems, depending on the strain causing the infection.

She had no doubt the TARDIS med bay held some kind of magic cure for the flu. The one time she’d been injured since coming on board, the Doctor had patched her up overnight with some weird blue gel and a tissue regenerator. Surely at some point in the future, humans would find a way to take care of pesky viruses like the flu.

But they didn’t have the TARDIS, and wouldn’t for a while. The Doctor had just finished the timey-wimey detector. He still needed to build the recorder and autocue, and they still needed to meet Billy Shipton before they could go home.

The Doctor was in the kitchen when she returned, still wearing his pyjamas. “How high is her fever?” Martha asked as she poured ketchup over her chips.

“39C.” He turned the burner under the soup off. “If it gets much higher, I’ll give her paracetamol, just to keep her comfortable, but right now, I’m letting the fever do its job.”

The bedroom door opened again, and Rose shuffled into the kitchen. “I thought I smelled chips,” she mumbled.

“You can share mine if you want,” the Doctor offered, “or I heated up soup for you.”

Rose looked at the Doctor’s meal, then at the soup on the stove. “Soup, please.”

The Doctor pushed her gently towards the couch and ladled some soup into a bowl. “Here you go,” he said as he carried it into the living room, trying too hard to sound upbeat. He handed her the bowl, then sat down next to her with his own dinner in his lap.

Martha watched her friends quietly while they ate their supper. Rose was resting heavily against the couch, letting the furniture support her completely. She only consumed half the bowl of soup before asking the Doctor to take it away. Despite his offer, she didn’t touch his dinner.
The Doctor’s eyes never left Rose. He took in every tired sigh, every huff of discomfort, every time her eyes started to close in exhaustion, and with each one, Martha saw the lines around his mouth tighten.

As soon as he finished his fish and chips, the Doctor nudged Rose awake. “Hmmm?”

He stood up and offered his hand. “Want to go back to bed?” he asked quietly.

Rose took his hand and he pulled her to her feet, resting a hand on her waist when she swayed slightly. He let her lean against him as they walked to their bedroom, then hovered while she climbed back into bed.

“How are you feeling, love?” he asked.

“Hot. Achy. Head hurts.”

The Doctor brushed her hair back from her forehead, resting his hand there for a moment. She definitely felt warmer than she had before, so he took her temperature again—39.5 now.

“I’ll get you some paracetamol,” he promised, though he suspected he’d have to wake her up to take it.

Martha had a glass of water and paracetamol ready for him when he returned to the living room, and he reached for them with a grateful smile.

Rose stirred when she heard the door open and close, and managed to prop herself up enough to take the pills without any assistance. She tried to hand the glass back half full, but he pushed it gently back towards her.

“You need to stay hydrated,” he told her when she looked up at him hazily. She sighed, but drank the rest of the water. “I’ll be right back,” he promised her when he took the glass from her.

When the Doctor stepped into the living room, Martha was perched in the armchair like she was waiting for him. “Can I talk to you for a moment?” she asked.

He went into the kitchen and set the glass down in the sink, then sat down on the couch. “What’s on your mind, Martha?”

“I’d really like to look Rose over in the morning,” she told him. “I know you’re her doctor as well as her Doctor, and I’m sure you’ve caught everything, but it would make me feel like I was doing something to help.”

The Doctor blinked at her; he hadn’t expected that. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” he said regretfully. “I can’t catch influenza, but you can. Even though I’m sure you’re vaccinated since you work at a hospital, you know as well as I do that the flu vaccine isn’t 100% effective.”

Martha slumped, and the Doctor felt a surge of affection for this woman who’d become such a good friend to both him and Rose. “If you want to help, maybe you could go out in the morning and get juice and things Rose could eat. You know the kinds of foods a sick person can handle.”

She brightened. “Yeah, I can do that.”

The Doctor’s gaze shifted to his bedroom door. Despite her exhaustion, Rose still seemed to be awake. “I should…”
Martha shooed him off. “Go on. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Rose stirred when he stepped into the room, and he shut the door quickly so the light from the living room wouldn’t wake her up. As soon as he slipped under the covers, she rolled towards him, moaning when the movement jostled her aching head.

The Doctor brushed his hand over her hair in slow, rhythmic strokes. *Sleep, love. I’ll be here if you need me.* A soft sigh escaped her lips, and she fell asleep within minutes.
Rose’s fever lingered for a week, and she was still too weak to stand unassisted for a few days after that. The Doctor spent most of her convalescence in their room with her, fetching her food and water and reading to her while she was awake. The video recorder and autocue were almost untouched, and despite their importance to getting them back home, Martha couldn’t begrudge his unwillingness to leave Rose’s side.

So she was surprised when, ten days after Rose became ill, he started spending every hour of the day working on the video recorder, barely even taking a break for food.

“You seem obsessed with that device all of a sudden,” she remarked casually during Rose’s afternoon nap on the second day of this.

The Doctor’s eyes flicked up to meet hers over the rim of his glasses before he looked back at what he was doing. “Well, this is what’s going to get us home. Or get home back to us.”

“Right, I know. But seriously—you’re barely even taking a break to eat. I hear you out here in the middle of the night, too, so I know you sneak out of bed while Rose is sleeping to work on it more. Last week you hardly left her side, and this week, you barely spend any time with her.”

He raised his eyebrows. “That’s a bit of an exaggeration, don’t you think?”

Martha crossed her arms over her chest. “I prefer to call it hyperbole—exaggeration to make a point.”

The Doctor sighed and leaned back in his chair. “I realised the date a few days ago. Not the calendar date,” he said quickly before Martha could say anything, “but the date for Rose and me.”

“And that is…”

“Currently? A week before our wedding anniversary.”

Martha smiled. “Oh, that’s great! Do you have anything planned?” The Doctor looked at her, and she finally got it. “Ah. You’d rather not be stuck here for your anniversary.”

“That, and I’d rather my wife were healthy enough to enjoy our anniversary—which isn’t going to happen as long as we’re stuck here.” He raked his hands through his hair, leaving it stuck up in all directions. “But yeah. I’m generally rubbish at planning—” He pointed at her when she chuckled. “No laughing, Martha Jones.” She pressed her lips together, and he continued. “I did have a sort of vague idea for our anniversary, though. And it’s not something I can do stuck on Earth, since the location itself is non-terrestrial.”

“Okay, so you had plans to take her to some alien resort. Which, I have to say, is far more romantic than I would have expected from you.” The Doctor mumbled something, and Martha cocked her head. “Sorry, what was that?”

“I said, I was going to take her back to Barcelona, where we spent our first holiday as a couple.”

“Far more romantic,” Martha said slowly, though she was starting to think she needed to reassess the Doctor’s levels of romance. As dismissive as he could be of human customs, it was easy to forgot
how much he would do to make Rose smile.

She shook her head and moved on. “But you’re forgetting something, Doctor. Even if you finished
the video recorder today, we have no way of knowing when Billy Shipton will arrive—and until he
does, we’re stuck. So do you have someplace more local in mind to take her?”

The Doctor stared at her, and she sighed. “Doctor, it’s your first anniversary. You can’t pretend it
isn’t happening just because you can’t take her where you want.”

He took his glasses off and closed his eyes. “She doesn’t have the energy to do anything right now,”
he said wearily. “We might be able to go out for a nice dinner, but I really wanted…” He sighed and
rubbed at the bridge of his nose.

Martha thought for a moment. It really wasn’t fair that they would basically miss out on celebrating
their first anniversary because the separation from the TARDIS had taken such a toll on Rose’s
health.

A glimmer of an idea occurred to her. “Look, I know you’ve said you can’t just tell yourself to come
pick us up or something, because of the timelines and all that. But isn’t there some kind of… I don’t
know, medicine or something you could drop off after we get out of here, something that would help
Rose handle being away from home?”

The Doctor was shaking his head before she finished her sentence. “It’s never a good idea to run into
a past or future version of yourself.” He tugged on his ear. “It’s happened to me a few times, of
course, and I’ve lived through it so far. But the Weeping Angels already made this a weak point,
temporally, and meeting my future self would just be asking to create a paradox.”

Martha wasn’t ready to let go of the idea. “What if you didn’t meet?” she pressed. “You could tell
yourself to put the anti-tiredness serum just outside our door when you knew you would be out of the
flat. Then when this you got back, it would be hanging on the door, waiting.”

“And that’s the other problem with your idea,” the Doctor explained. “I’ll have to do more complete
tests in the TARDIS to be sure, but I don’t think there’s a serum or tea or drug I could give Rose to
combat this effect. She needs to be near…”

His voice trailed off and a glimmer of hope lit his eyes. “She needs to be near the TARDIS. So if we
brought the TARDIS back here and just parked until our TARDIS returns to us, that would give her
the energy she needs to get through the rest of our time in 1969.”

She could see him running calculations in his head, probably figuring the timey-wimey risk factors.
Then his face split in a wide grin and he jumped to his feet. “Thank you, Martha,” he called out as he
bounded out of the flat. He only had a week to plan the perfect weekend, without the benefit of
either the internet for booking the reservations or a time machine to fudge the timing.

He did think of another problem as soon as he’d left the flat. Martha’s wages were enough to live on,
especially since he’d paid the first and last month’s rent and all deposits with the money he’d brought
with him. But they didn’t have the kind of discretionary budget that would allow for a romantic
weekend away.

He ran his hands through his hair. Well… as long as I’m making a note to bring the TARDIS back to
this era, I suppose it wouldn’t be breaking too many rules if I made our reservations in the future?
And paid in cash, up front?

It was harder than he’d thought to find the perfect location, but finally, he was successful. He jotted
down the phone number, both for his own sake and for his future self’s sake. When he got home that afternoon, he’d call to confirm the reservation, and everything would be taken care of.

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Rose woke up in stages the next morning—first, she felt the weight of a leg slung over hers, then the tickle of a hand running lightly up and down her arm, and finally she became aware of the Doctor nuzzling into her neck.

“Good morning, love,” he whispered in her ear. “Sleep well?”

“Mmm… morning,” she mumbled sleepily as she rolled over onto her side, wrapping her arm securely around his waist. “How are you today?”

“Perfect, now that you’re awake.”

Something in his voice caught Rose’s attention. She opened her eyes and looked around the room, trying to find what he was so excited about—then she realised it was her.

“I’m awake, but I’ve only gotten eight hours of sleep.”

The Doctor grinned down at her and brushed his knuckles over her cheekbone. “That, Rose Tyler, is because the brilliant Martha Jones helped me find the solution to our problem.”

Rose focused for a moment, then breathed a sigh of relief. “There’s another you nearby with the TARDIS, isn’t there?”

“A future us, actually,” he corrected. “You’d be able to sense me, and probably yourself, except their TARDIS is shielding them. We just need to remember to come back at some point, probably after Martha decides to leave.”

“I owe Martha a huge thank you,” Rose said. “It feels good to have energy.”

“I can only imagine,” the Doctor said, and Rose could feel his own gratitude. Her illness had weighed on him heavily, though he’d managed not to blame himself for it.

“Well, if I’m awake and finally feeling like a normal human being, I’m not going to spend the whole day in bed.”

Rose bounced to her feet with more energy than she ordinarily showed even when they were at home, and the Doctor laughed at her excitement. “Don’t push yourself too hard,” he cautioned. “You’re still getting over a serious illness.”

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t worry; I’m not gonna run a marathon or anything. I’m just happy that I can do basic things like take a shower and get dressed without wanting to lie down and sleep for another hour after.” Her stomach growled. “Mmm, maybe you could make some kind of celebratory breakfast?” She flashed a winning smile at the Doctor.

He made a show of grumbling, but he squeezed her hand as he left the room, and Rose could feel the relief pouring off of him.

In the bathroom, Rose tempted fate by turning the shower warmer than she’d been able to handle since their arrival in 1969. The hot water beating down on her energised her, rather than sucking up her reserves, and by the time she was dressed and in the kitchen, she felt almost like her old self. She spotted a bowl and cup in the sink, so she guessed Martha had already gone to work.
A familiar, banana-y aroma filled the room. Rose wrapped her arms around the Doctor’s waist and looked down at the frying pan. “Banana pancakes?”

“Well, we don’t have a waffle iron.” He flipped the pancakes with a deft hand.

Bacon was cooking in another pan, and Rose snagged a piece and leaned against the counter to watch the Doctor cook.

“Do you remember the last time you made banana waffles?” she asked.

The Doctor scoffed. “Of course I do. Sixteen months ago, the morning after I found you on Bad Wolf Bay.” His smile softened. “The day I proposed,” he added.

The kettle whistled just as Rose finished her bacon, and she was in the middle of making their tea when the Doctor’s words sank in. *Sixteen months… and if it took us four months to contact Mum and we got married only a few days after that…*

“Our anniversary is next week!” she said after she counted back.

Excitement fizzed in both directions over the bond. The Doctor grinned at her and flipped the pancakes in the air and caught them with the plate. “Yes it is, Rose Tyler. One year down, a lifetime to go.”

Rose laughed when he pulled her into his arms and spun them around the kitchen in an impromptu dance. When they neared the counter, she twirled out of his arms, grabbed the tea, and sat down at the table.

“We should do something,” she said when the Doctor brought the food over and sat down next to her.

“Well, I had plans to take you back to Barcelona, but…” He tugged on his ear. “That’ll have to wait until we get the TARDIS back. But! There’s no reason we can’t go away for the weekend.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Nothing fancy—a cottage on the Isle of Wight, just the two of us.” He cleared his throat. “I might have booked everything already, actually. So I could surprise you.”

The Doctor’s neck had turned a dull shade of red, and Rose took a sip of tea to hide her smile. “That sounds lovely,” she said, and he beamed at her. “It seems like I need to go shopping this afternoon,” she told him as she poured syrup onto her pancakes.

“I could come with you,” he offered immediately.

Rose shook her head. “You stay here and work on the video recorder. The closer you are to being ready to go when Billy Shipton gets here, the faster we can get home.” He opened his mouth to argue, and she raised an eyebrow. “Doctor. I’m going shopping for a gift for you.”

“Oh. Oh!” He sat up straight. “Well, that’s all right then.”

“I thought you might think so. Now, we should probably eat since we don’t have the TARDIS to keep our food warm for us.”

oOoOoOoOo

Each night that week, Rose was able to sleep just a little bit less as the proximity to the TARDIS
slowly restored her strength. Grateful as she was to feel like herself again, it did leave her restless, wishing she could do something to contribute to their stay in 1969 or prepare for their return home.

She was flipping through the packet from Sally Sparrow two days later when an idea occurred to her. “Doctor,” she said, and he looked up from the mess of electronics surrounding him. “You should probably rehearse this.” She waved the transcript at him.

“Rehearse? I’ll have it on the autocue, if I can ever get the blasted thing built.” He scowled at the sonic screwdriver.

“Right, I know. But that’s just the lines. You need to practice the timing, figure out how long to pause between sentences so Sally and Larry can say their bits.”

He leaned back in the armchair. “I hadn’t thought of that,” he admitted. “I’ll need a rehearsal partner if I’m going to do this.”

Rose grinned at him. “I happen to know someone who’s looking for something to do.”

The Doctor smiled back and joined her on the couch so they could both read off the transcript. “Well, let’s get started, then.”

OoOoOoOoO

“Roooooose…” Cold air hit Rose’s skin, and, still half asleep, she tried to grab at the duvet. “Rooooooose…” the voice repeated.

The Doctor’s excitement was what finally pulled Rose awake. She opened her eyes and glared at him. Her morning grumpiness had returned, once the novelty of being awake wore off. Plus, she’d been up late packing their suitcase—it hadn’t been easy to hide the Doctor’s present without him noticing it.

“Some of us were sleeping,” she pointed out.

“Oh, but we’ve got so much to do today!” He bounced to his feet, already fully dressed.

There was something off in the room, and after looking around for a moment, Rose realised what it was. The window was still dark. She blinked and focused on the time, then looked at the Doctor in surprise.

“It’s only five am,” she said.

“Yep! And you need to get up, because our train leaves in two hours.”

The last of her grouchiness disappeared in the face of his enthusiasm, and Rose smiled and pushed herself upright. “Well then, you make breakfast while I take a shower, and we can go.”

He leaned down and rubbed his nose against hers. “Are you sure you don’t need any help in the shower?” he suggested, his lips just a breath away from hers.

Rose combed her fingers through his hair and tilted her head back to kiss him. The Doctor trailed a hand up and down her spine, encouraging her to arch into him as his lips moved persuasively against hers. It had been so long since he’d touched her with any kind of intent, and she was tempted to just pull him back down onto the bed.

Why couldn’t she do that? There was a reason…
“Train,” she mumbled when she’d caught hold of the thought.

“Hmmm?” He dropped kisses along her jawline.

When he started nibbling at her collarbone, Rose nearly forgot why she was trying to stop him, but then she caught sight of the packed suitcase waiting by the door. “You said we have a train to catch in two hours.”

He sighed and pressed his forehead to hers while they both gathered what was left of their control. “Tonight, Rose Tyler,” he promised as he stood up.

“Looking forward to it, Doctor.”

oOoOoOoOo

That evening, they sat on the beach and watched the sun sink below the horizon. The pinks and blues splashed across the sky reminded the Doctor of Makuyu, and when Rose took his hand and played with his wedding ring, he knew she was remembering the same thing.

“When did you realise you were falling for me?” she asked. “I know you can’t pinpoint when you fell in love with me, and you said on Glaurus that us being together was inevitable from “Run,” but there must have been a moment when you realised you were thinking about me as more than just a companion or a friend.”

The Doctor dug his toes into the sand and pressed his tongue against the back of his teeth as he thought. “Probably when the Dalek called you the woman I love,” he said finally. “I wouldn’t normally give any credence to the words of a Dalek, but they kept repeating in my head, long after we were back in the TARDIS.” He stretched his legs out in front of him and leaned back on his hands. “And then I remembered how difficult it had been to give Mickey the order to fire on Downing Street, and I knew I’d been falling for you for a while.”

Rose rested her head on his shoulder. “I remember that,” she said. “The way you looked at me when you said you could save the world, but lose me… like you really didn’t know if you could do it.”

“I didn’t,” the Doctor admitted quietly. “You’d brought light back into my life after so much darkness, and I didn’t know if I could let that go.”

He cleared his throat. “And then less than a week later, that Dalek called me out on feelings I wasn’t even aware I had yet. You could have knocked me over with a feather when I realised it was right.” He looked over at Rose and brushed a piece of hair behind her ear. “What about you? When did I stop being just your grumpy alien chauffeur?”

Rose nudged him with her elbow. “Hey now, I never saw you like that.”

The Doctor’s laughter was self-deprecating. “Maybe not, but I’m sure my charming personality didn’t sweep you off your feet right away.”

She pulled her knees up and wrapped her arms around her legs. “You might not have swept me off my feet, but looking back, I had a crush on you almost from the start.” She shot him a sidelong glance. “You have no idea how much it meant to me to be treated like I mattered.”

He nodded, remembering what she’d told him after the Brilliant. Given her past, his honest admiration and respect would have been very appealing.

“But the real point of no return was when you took me to 1987. I knew I was attracted to you before
then,” she said quietly, “but that day was a revelation. Seeing the Reapers take you hurt more than watching my dad die. And it wasn’t guilt, either—it was this ache, because I couldn’t imagine my life without you.”

“Rose.” The Doctor’s throat closed up, and without words, he leaned over and kissed her gently.

He rested his forehead against hers when he pulled out of the kiss, and Rose could feel all of the emotions threatening to overwhelm him: his fear when she’d been sick, his frustration that he couldn’t take care of her like he would have if they’d been at home, and over it all, a love so deep it couldn’t be put into words.

Rose placed her hands over his hearts. “I’m sorry,” she murmured. He tried to cut her off, but she shook her head. “No, I haven’t said this yet, and I need to. You and Martha both tried to tell me to take care of myself, and I ignored you because I was annoyed that I had limitations. I put my health at risk, and I know that upset you.”

The Doctor swallowed hard. “Your stubbornness is one of the things I love about you,” he said, and she could tell he was choosing his words carefully. “I understand why you didn’t want to believe you needed to rest. But I won’t lie, Rose—you really worried me when you made yourself ill. Without the TARDIS, you would’ve had to rely on primitive human medicine if you’d taken a turn for the worse. Please, if something like this happens again…”

His words trailed off, and Rose nodded. “I’ll try to take better care of myself,” she promised. “For myself, and for you.”

“Thank you,” he breathed. “I don’t know what I’d do without you, love.”

Rose opened her mouth to tell him he’d never have to find out, but the words got stuck in her throat. Anxious to dispel the sombre mood that threatened their celebration, she jumped up and pulled the Doctor to his feet.

“Come on.” She tugged him towards their cottage. “I packed my new green dress, and I want to go out for dinner and dancing.”

Rose woke up the next morning to the distracting sensation of the Doctor tracing patterns over her bare skin. He pressed a kiss to the top of her head as soon as he could tell she was awake.

“Happy anniversary, Rose.”

She shifted her weight off of him onto her elbow, despite his protests. “Happy anniversary,” she returned. “I want to give you your present now.”

The Doctor’s eyes lit up and he pushed himself into a sitting position. “Where is it?” he asked eagerly.

Rose laughed as she reached into the bedside table where she’d stashed the wrapped package while unpacking the suitcase. “Here,” she told him, biting her lip as she handed it to him.

The Doctor tore the paper off, then looked at the box with just a hint of puzzlement in his eyes. “A camera?”

She understood the question. They had far superior cameras on the TARDIS: cameras capable of printing as soon as the picture was taken, cameras that captured the scent of a moment, cameras that
let you edit directly on the device. So why had she given him a vintage film camera from 1969?

“It’ll be easy to remember the hard parts of this trip,” she told him quietly. “But we still have a few weeks left, and I think they’re gonna be good. I wanted us to be able to look back at the happy moments from when we were here.”

He stared at her, his mouth hanging open slightly.

“I thought we could start today, enjoying the beautiful weather and scenery and taking pictures of each other?”

The Doctor set the camera down on his bedside table, then reached for Rose and pulled her into his lap. You are the most amazing, incredible, brilliant woman, he told her as he sucked her bottom lip between his own.

Rose pulled back and shifted to straddle him. You like it then? She ran her hand through his hair and smiled down at him hopefully.

The Doctor rested his hands on her hips as he leaned forward to kiss her again. I love it, he assured her. It’s a fantastic idea, and I can’t wait to get some fun pictures of you today.

Humour sparked along the bond, and then she scooted back a few inches and acted like she was about to get up. Well then, we should probably get out of bed…

The Doctor growled, then wrapped his arms around her and pulled her snugly against him. Later.

oOoOoOoOo

Several hours later, Rose stood with the Doctor at the upper entrance to Shanklin Chine, looking down into the gorge cut in the soft, sandstone cliff. “It’s beautiful,” she breathed, admiring the waterfall cascading down the rock face in front of them.

“Time for the first picture,” the Doctor said. “Here, lean against the railing.”

Rose tested the strength of the wooden railing, and confident it could support her weight, she spread her arms out on either side of her and reclined back, smiling at the Doctor, who was looking through the camera viewfinder.

“Perfect,” he muttered, and clicked the shutter three times in quick succession.

“There’s someone on the trail behind you,” Rose told him, and he jumped out of the way, smiling at the older couple who walked by.

“Ready to go?”

Rose took the hand he offered. “Absolutely.”

They descended into the gorge hand-in-hand, stopping frequently to admire the natural beauty and take more pictures of each other. The Doctor was initially reluctant to hand the camera to Rose, but he acceded to her request when she pointed out that maybe he wasn’t the only one who’d want to have good memories to look back on.

They bumped into the same older couple several times, passing them when they stopped, and being passed in turn. Finally, at the base of the second waterfall when the Doctor had taken the camera back and was trying to find the best angle for a photo, the other woman smiled at Rose.
“Are you here on your honeymoon?” she asked while her husband joined the Doctor.

“Celebrating our anniversary,” Rose told her, rubbing her thumb over her wedding ring.

“Oh, so are we. Twenty years.”

Rose laughed lightly. “Just one, so far.” She held out her hand. “I’m Rose Tyler, and my husband is the Doctor.”

“Joan Whitfield,” the woman returned, shaking her hand. “You know, Nigel is a photographer, if you’d like to get a picture with both of you in it.”

Rose had just been wishing for exactly that, but she still hesitated. “We wouldn’t want to impose.”

Joan waved off her protest. “Nonsense. You’re here to celebrate your relationship—it would be a shame if you didn’t get at least one picture with the two of you together.”

The Doctor joined them, empty-handed and eyes sparkling. “Nigel just offered to take our picture,” he told Rose, holding his hand out for her.

“You see?” Joan and Rose laughed.

The Doctor led Rose out onto the grassy bank and wrapped his arms around her waist. She rested her hands over his and leaned back against his chest while the small but pretty waterfall burbled merrily as it cascaded over the rocks above.

They didn’t see Nigel and Joan again after thanking them and parting ways. The older couple turned around and headed back up to the top of the chine, while the Doctor and Rose continued on the trail.

The Fisherman’s Cottage pub beckoned to the Doctor’s empty stomach, but a sign on the trail promised a lookout just around the corner.

“Let’s see the view first,” Rose suggested. “Then we can eat.”

He cast a longing look at the pub, but followed her around the bend. When he saw the way the late afternoon sunlight danced across the water, he forgot about wanting to eat. The sea was calm, and the light shone through the waves, turning them shades of translucent blue and green as the water rippled.

“It’s so beautiful,” Rose said. “So… endless.”

The Doctor wrapped his arms around her waist and bent down to whisper in her ear.

“My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
My love as deep; the more I give to thee,
The more I have, for both are infinite.”

He felt Rose’s breath stutter in her chest, then she turned around and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. Her right hand went automatically for his hair as she pushed herself up on her toes and kissed him.

_I love you. I love you so much it hurts._

His own hearts were aching as he moved his lips tenderly against hers. _How long are you going to_
stay with me?

Forever. She gasped when he pulled back to press light kisses to her nose, her eyelids, her cheeks. Forever, Doctor. I'm never gonna leave you.

The Doctor moved back to her lips and kissed her with breathtaking passion. I love you, Rose Tyler. For as long as our forever lasts.

Chapter End Notes

The quote is from Act II, scene 2 of Romeo and Juliet.
After the Doctor and Rose returned from their weekend away, his tolerance for being stuck in the past dwindled rapidly. He stayed up late working on the video camera, muttering about antique technology and, “How am I supposed to build a camera that can also program a flight plan when they’ve barely invented the compact disk?”

Rose’s patience with his moodiness was almost at a breaking point when she heard a strange noise at breakfast one morning. “Doctor? What is—”

He jumped out of his chair and ran into the living room so fast she barely caught a glimpse of the broad grin on his face. “Oh, yes!” he shouted, brandishing the timey-wimey device. “Are you ready to meet Billy Shipton, ladies?”

Rose and Martha scooted back from the table and grabbed their jackets. “Where will we find him?” Martha asked.

“That’s what this is for!” he said, putting the device to his ear and counting, his lips moving silently. “It works a little bit like a Geiger counter, so the closer we get, the faster the beeps will come.”

“At last, you get to use your timey-wimey detector for its intended purpose,” Rose said. “No longer just an egg cooker, now it will actually detect temporal fluctuations.”

The Doctor grinned and held the door open. “Exactly, Rose Tyler!” he crowed. “Now, are you ready to go hunting for someone else out of his time?”

“Oh, yes,” she said.

But it was Martha who led them down the stairs. “I am so ready to get home,” she said eagerly. “Let’s go!”

They were near St. Paul’s when the beeps of timey-wimey detector changed tone. “This way!” the Doctor called out, running down the street. They turned the corner into an alley—similar to the one they’d landed in, he noticed—and he spotted a man leaning against the brick wall, looking like his head had just been done in.

“Welcome!” The Doctor crouched down in front of him and tried to offer a reassuring smile.

Billy squinted up at them. “Where am I?” he grunted.

“1969,” Rose told him. “Trust me, there are worse times to be stuck in.”

“And you’ve got the moon landing to look forward to,” the Doctor added encouragingly.

“Hopefully we’ll be gone by then,” Martha said, “but maybe we could go after we’ve got transport again?”

“Maybe,” the Doctor said absently. He was watching Billy closely, ready for some kind of argument.
To his credit, Billy’s next question was, “How did I get here?”

“The same way we did. The touch of an angel. Same one, probably, since you ended up in the same
year.” Billy started to get up, and the Doctor waved his hands quickly. “No, no. No, no, no, don’t
get up. Time travel without a capsule. Nasty. Catch your breath. Don’t go swimming for half an
hour.”

Billy sagged back against the brick wall and stared up at them, looking dazed. “I don’t… I can’t…”

The Doctor shifted to sit beside Billy. “Fascinating race, the Weeping Angels. The only psychopaths
in the universe to kill you nicely. No mess, no fuss, they just zap you into the past and let you live to
death.”

Billy rolled his head to look at the Doctor. The Doctor didn’t think he looked quite as grateful for the
Weeping Angels’ unique methods as he should, so he sped up, rambling about the surprisingly
painless sentence of living in the past.

“The rest of your life used up and blown away in the blink of an eye. You die in the past, and in the
present they consume the energy of all the days you might have had. All your stolen moments.” He
sniffed. “They’re creatures of the abstract. They live off potential energy.”

Billy looked from Rose to Martha to the Doctor. “What in God’s name are you talking about?” he
asked, his confusion and frustration making his West Indies accent sharp.

“Trust me,” Martha told him. “Just nod when he stops for breath.”

The Doctor waved his device at Billy. “Tracked you down with this. This is my timey-wimey
detector. It goes ding when there’s stuff. Also, it can boil an egg at thirty paces, whether you want it
to or not, actually, so I’ve learned to stay away from hens. It’s not pretty when they blow.”

Billy shook his head and blinked, like he was trying to wake himself up from a nightmare. “I don’t
understand. Where am I?”

Rose settled down on the other side of him and put a hand on his shoulder. “I know it’s hard to
believe, but you really are in 1969,” she told him, keeping her voice soft.

She could feel his lungs hitch, and finally, he nodded.

The Doctor smiled at her gratefully, then looked at Billy. “Normally, I’d offer you a lift home, but
somebody nicked my motor. So I need you to take a message to Sally Sparrow. And I’m sorry, Billy.
I am very, very sorry. It’s going to take you a while.”

That was Rose’s cue to interrupt, before they gave the poor out-of-time bloke a worse shock than
he’d already had. “But I think we can discuss that in our flat over supper, can’t we?” She hopped to
her feet and offered Billy a hand, pulling him up. “What’s your favourite kind of take away, Billy?
Chips? Curry? We’ll stop on the way home.”

In the end, they stopped by their regular curry place, getting enough for all four of them. An hour
after meeting Billy Shipton in the alleyway, they were seated around the dining table, explaining the
whole story to him.

He thumbed through the stack of pictures Sally Sparrow had taken of Wester Drumlins while they
talked. “So this is why all those cars kept being abandoned by the old house, then,” he said, almost to
himself.
“Speaking of cars,” the Doctor drawled, leaning against the table. “I don’t suppose you’ve seen an old police box?”

Billy’s eyes narrowed. “I have, as a matter of fact,” he told them. “I only showed it to Sally Sparrow a few hours ago—right before I ended up in that alley.”

Rose laughed when the Doctor nearly bounced in his chair. “That’s our… well, it’s ours,” she told Billy, not wanting to get into what exactly the TARDIS was. “The Doctor has been counting on it turning up, since it’s mentioned at the end of the transcript of the conversation with Sally and Larry, but it feels good to know someone has seen her more recently than we have.”

Billy pushed back from the table and dropped his fork onto his plate. “There isn’t a key, though,” he warned. “I’ve tried to get into it for six months, and nothing will open it.”

“Sally Sparrow had the key,” Rose explained. “Martha’s fell out of her pocket when we were transported here, and one of the angels picked it up. Sally took it from them and gave it back to us in the folder along with all the information.”

Billy picked up Sally’s detailed report. “So the day I see her again is the day I die.”

“Oh, don’t think about it like that,” the Doctor said. “You’ve got years to go before then, a whole life to live. Another Sally to meet.”

“And I can’t call her up before then because…”

“Welllll, you could, only it would tear a hole in the fabric of space and time and destroy two-thirds of the universe.”

Rose glared at the Doctor, and he ducked his head apologetically. “Sorry.”

Billy laughed disbelievingly. “I think I need a place to stay for the night.”

“You can sleep on our couch,” Martha offered.

oOoOoOoOo

Martha had trouble sleeping that night, wondering what they’d do if Billy Shipton refused to help them. She’d asked the Doctor that same question more than once, and he’d brushed her off. Sally Sparrow’s report was gospel, and the report said Billy Shipton helped them. That was all he needed to know.

But seeing how shocked he’d been at dinner, Martha wasn’t so sure. She didn’t blame him, honestly. It was a lot for her to take in, and she’d been living in the TARDIS for over six months now.

Billy seemed to have come to terms with his lot though, because over breakfast, he finally agreed to help them get home. He turned out to be the help the Doctor needed to finish the video recorder. His parents had owned a second-hand electronics shop, and he’d spent his days after school tinkering with broken down appliances, getting them working so they could be sold.

Between his practical, hands-on knowledge of older electronics and the Doctor’s understanding of what needed to happen in order to create the control disk that would send the TARDIS to them, they managed to cobble together a camera and autocue in just a week.
“Are you ready for your film debut?” Rose asked the Doctor after breakfast on the day they were going to finally film the conversation.

He peered into the mirror and adjusted his hair. “I’m ready to get the TARDIS back,” he told her. “Anything I have to do to make that happen, I’m ready for.”

Rose waited, and when he started to tie the swirly tie he’d worn their whole time in 1969, she gently took it from him and handed him a long, skinny box. “A good luck present,” she told him.

The Doctor opened the box and laughed when he read the store name printed on the tissue paper. “You went to Henrik’s!” he said as he pulled out the silk tie. The brown background was a good match for his suit, and the diagonal stripes in alternating shades of blue would go well with most of his shirts.

“Couldn’t resist,” Rose told him.

He flipped up his collar and tied it nimbly. “Well, what do you think?” he asked, holding his arms out. “Do I look ready for the camera?”

Rose circled him, fixing his collar so it lay flat and adjusting the knot of the tie until it was just so. “Perfect,” she declared finally.

The Doctor bent his head and brushed a soft kiss over her lips. “Thank you for the tie.”

“Thank you for working so hard to get us home.”

When Billy arrived, he fussed with the lighting, then stood back, out of the frame. “All right, Doctor. Ready whenever you are.” The Doctor slipped his glasses on and nodded, and when Billy pressed a button, the red light on the camera started flashing and the autocue began.

“Yup. That’s me,” the Doctor said, in answer to the line spoken offscreen, identifying him as the Doctor.

Rose followed along with the autocue, trying not to recite Sally’s lines as she had all the times the Doctor had rehearsed his timing.

SALLY: Okay, that was scary.

LARRY: No, it sounds like he’s replying, but he always says that.

The Doctor nodded. “Yes, I do.”

LARRY: And that.

“Yup. And this.”

SALLY: He can hear us. Oh, my God, you can really hear us?

LARRY: Of course he can’t hear us. Look, I’ve got a transcript. See? Everything he says. Yup, that’s me. Yes, I do. Yup, and this. Next it’s—

“Are you going to read out the whole thing?” the Doctor asked, the exasperation in his voice not an act.
LARRY: Sorry.

SALLY: Who are you?

The Doctor nodded. “I’m a time traveller.” He shrugged. “Or I was. I’m stuck in 1969.”

Rose stepped into the frame—the next line was hers. “I prefer ‘temporarily grounded’ to stuck.”

The Doctor shook his head and smiled at her. “It doesn’t have nearly the ring though—‘Temporarily grounded with you, Rose Tyler?’” He looked at the camera. “This is my wife, by the way. Rose Tyler.”

“Hello!” Rose waved, then stepped back.

Martha leaned into the frame. “Well, temporarily grounded or stuck, we’re still in 1969, and I’m working in a shop to pay our way—all because the transcript says that I said I did. And I tried to get the Doctor to let me say something different, but he was all, ‘Do you want to cause a paradox, Martha Jones?’” She shot the Doctor a wry smile before stepping out of the frame to stand with Rose, who pointed at the autocue to redirect the Doctor’s attention.

SALLY: I’ve seen this bit before.

“Quite possibly.”

SALLY: 1969, that’s where you’re talking from?

The Doctor bobbed his head. “Afraid so.”

SALLY: But you’re replying to me. You can’t know exactly what I’m going to say, forty years before I say it.

“Thirty-eight,” the Doctor countered, a defensive edge in his voice.

Rose smacked her palm against her forehead. How on Earth could a scripted conversation sound exactly like him?

LARRY: I’m getting this down. I’m writing in your bits.

SALLY: How? How is this possible? Tell me.

LARRY: Not so fast.

The Doctor sighed, and Rose prepared herself for his lecture on the nature of time. Even after hearing this dozens of times as they rehearsed—even after living it for four years—this bit still gave her a bit of a headache.

“People don’t understand time,” he explained to Sally Sparrow. “It’s not what you think it is.”

SALLY: Then what is it?

He looked straight into the camera. “Complicated.”

SALLY: Tell me.

“Very complicated.”
SALLY: I’m clever and I’m listening. And don’t patronise me because people have died, and I’m not happy. Tell me.

Rose cheered silently at Sally’s attitude. Scripted or not, that answer was patronising, and she deserved better.

The Doctor swallowed hard and straightened up. “People assume that time is a strict progression of cause to effect,” he said, motioning with his hands as he spoke. “But actually from a non-linear, non-subjective viewpoint, it’s more like a big ball of wibbly wobbly, timey-wimey stuff.”

SALLY: Yeah, I’ve seen this bit before. You said that sentence got away from you.

The Doctor stared off into space, and Rose could see him trying to figure out where exactly that sentence came from. “It got away from me, yeah,” he agreed.

SALLY: Next thing you’re going to say is, “Well I can hear you.”

“Well, I can hear you,” he said frankly.

SALLY: This isn’t possible.

LARRY: No. It’s brilliant!

The Doctor backtracked. “Well, not hear you, exactly, but I know everything you’re going to say.”

LARRY: Always gives me the shivers, that bit.

SALLY: How can you know what I’m going to say?

“Look to your left.” The Doctor tilted his head to the right, which would look like he was indicating left onscreen.

LARRY: What does he mean by look to your left? I’ve written tons about that on the forums. I think it’s a political statement.

SALLY: He means you. What are you doing?

LARRY: I’m writing in your bits. That way I’ve got a complete transcript of the whole conversation. Wait until this hits the net. This will explode the egg forums.

“I’ve got a copy of the finished transcript,” the Doctor explained. “It’s on my autocue.”

SALLY: How can you have a copy of the finished transcript? It’s still being written.

“I told you. I’m a time traveller. I got it in the future.”

That left out the detail that Sally herself gave them the entire packet, but considering they knew she didn’t figure that out until they met—four months ago for them, and months in the future for her—he couldn’t explain that to her.

SALLY: Okay, let me get my head round this. You’re reading aloud from a transcript of a conversation you’re still having.

The Doctor sighed and waved his hand back and forth, trying to get her past this point. “Wibbly wobbly, timey-wimey.”
Rose nodded. It sounded barmy, but it really was the best way to understand time and causality. They could be reading from a transcript that Sally gave them in her personal future because it had already happened for her when she’d handed it to them. And having a complete, two-sided conversation like this was the only way they could hope to get home.

*SALLY:* *Never mind that. You can do shorthand?*

*LARRY:* *So?*

“What matters is, we can communicate.” The Doctor used his hand to emphasise his words. “We have got big problems now. They have taken the blue box, haven’t they? The angels have the phone box.”

Rose shivered, just like she had the first time she’d read that part of the transcript. The idea of the TARDIS in the hands of the Weeping Angels didn’t bear thinking about. She didn’t want to know what they would have done to the ship if they’d gotten inside her.

*LARRY:* “The angels have the phone box.” That’s my favourite, I’ve got it on a t-shirt.

*SALLY:* What do you mean, angels? You mean those statue things?

“Creatures from another world,” the Doctor explained.

*SALLY:* But they’re just statues.

“Only when you see them.”

*SALLY:* What does that mean?

“The lonely assassins, they used to be called. No one quite knows where they came from, but they’re as old as the universe, or very nearly, and they have survived this long because they have the most perfect defence system ever evolved. They are quantum-locked. They don’t exist when they’re being observed. The moment they are seen by any other living creature, they freeze into rock. No choice. It’s a fact of their biology. In the sight of any living thing, they literally turn to stone. And you can’t kill a stone. Of course, a stone can’t kill you either. But then you turn your head away, then you blink, and oh yes it can.”

*SALLY:* Don’t take your eyes off that.

Rose hated this part of the transcript, because she could only imagine what was happening on Sally’s end. That one line suggested so much, as did the abrupt end of the conversation. There was an angel—maybe more than one—in the room where she and Larry were watching the DVD. Her gut tightened as the Doctor continued to speak. What would happen if the angels got to Sally and Larry before they finished listening?

“That’s why they cover their eyes,” the Doctor told them, and Rose relaxed a little, remembering the genius of his plan. “They’re not weeping. They can’t risk looking at each other. Their greatest asset is their greatest curse. They can never be seen. The loneliest creatures in the universe.” He leaned into the camera. “And I’m sorry. I am very, very sorry. It’s up to you now.”

*SALLY:* What am I supposed to do?

“The blue box, it’s my time machine. There is a world of time energy in there they could feast on forever, but the damage they could do could switch off the sun. You have got to send it back to me.”
The Doctor sat up slightly. They all knew that was the end of the transcript, but every time they reached this point, they hoped more would magically appear. Not knowing exactly how Sally and Larry would get the disk to the TARDIS was nerve-wracking.

“And that’s it, I’m afraid,” the Doctor said. “There’s no more from you on the transcript; that’s the last I’ve got.” He took his glasses off and frowned. “I don’t know what stopped you talking, but I can guess. They’re coming. The angels are coming for you. But listen, your life could depend on this. Don’t blink. Don’t even blink. Blink and you’re dead. They are fast. Faster than you can believe. Don’t turn your back, don’t look away, and don’t blink. Good luck.”

“And cut!” Billy said, ending the recording. “Now, are you sure your machine here managed to record the necessary information to get your ship back to you?”

The Doctor huffed. “Of course I’m sure!” he said. “D’you think I’d do something so important if I weren’t 100% certain it would work?”

“All right, all right!” Billy held his hands up. “So, if you’re sure, Doctor… Does that mean this is the last time I’ll see you?”

“I’m afraid it does.” The Doctor held out his hand, and the men shook. “You are going to have a fantastic life, Billy Shipton. Not the one you thought you’d have, but fantastic nonetheless.”

“Thank you, Doctor, I think I will. Apparently, I need to be on the lookout for a lady named Sally.”

“You take care, and tell Sally Sparrow we said hello when you see her again.”

Billy shook everyone’s hand, then left the flat.

“How much longer will we have to wait?” Martha asked after he was gone.

The Doctor looked at her in surprise. “Oh, didn’t I say? I’ve got a homing beacon running on the sonic screwdriver, and the program on that disk will tell the TARDIS to lock onto it. She should be here any minute.”

“No, you didn’t say!” Martha exclaimed, a smile on her face that the Doctor hadn’t seen since they’d gotten trapped in 1969. “I’d better go turn in my notice then, so management don’t look for me tomorrow.”

She ran out the door, and the Doctor looked at Rose. “I could have sworn I’d mentioned that…”

Rose chuckled and hugged the Doctor. “Sometimes you skip over the things you think are obvious, forgetting that not everyone’s got a big Time Lord brain,” she teased him.

“Huh.” The Doctor rubbed at the back of his neck. “So, when I said I was going to set a protocol for the TARDIS to come back as soon as the disk came through the doors…”

“You probably should have mentioned the timey-wimey bit that would bring her back today.”

She kissed him on the cheek, then spun away to start packing. They’d been in 1969 just shy of two months, but they’d still managed to collect possessions.

“Are you going to go talk to the landlord?” she called out as she pulled their clothes out of the closet and laid them on the bed.
“Nah, our future selves can do that.”

Rose shrugged; fair enough. “Then I guess we don’t really need to pack or clean either, do we?”

The Doctor wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her cheek. “Nope! Leave it all to do later. Let’s just go home.”

As always though, the TARDIS’ navigation was a bit off, and it wasn’t until they were sitting down to dinner that they felt the familiar wind kick up that indicated she was about to materialise.

The Doctor leapt to his feet. “Oh, yes!”

Rose had never been so glad to hear the TARDIS’ wheezing engines as she was when the ship finally appeared in the flat. *Oh, hello there!* she greeted her warmly. The TARDIS chimed and hummed in response, and Rose patted the door apologetically before walking inside. It had been March of 2007 when they’d investigated Wester Drumlins, and according to the information from Sally, her entire adventure had taken place in October of 2007. The poor ship had been left on her own for seven months.

“Oh, I am so glad to see this room,” Martha said as she walked into the console room, carrying her suitcase.

“Is everyone ready?” the Doctor asked, bouncing on his toes as his fingers rested lightly on the dematerialisation lever.

“Yes!” Rose and Martha said in unison.

“Back to time and space!” he exclaimed as he threw the lever.

The TARDIS shook as she took them into the vortex, and they all fell to the grating, laughing hysterically. “Where are we?” Martha asked once she got her breath back.

“Just the vortex,” the Doctor said. “I’d like to do a little maintenance before we take her anywhere.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Besides, it was dinner time when we left, so I didn’t think anyone would be up for an adventure before getting a night of sleep first.”

“A night of sleep in my own bed,” Martha said. Her conversation with Rose from months ago came back to her. She definitely felt up for an adventure, but if she was being given the night off, she was happy to take advantage of all the comforts of home.

“Martha, have we introduced you to *By the Light of the Asteroid*?” Rose asked.

Martha raised an eyebrow. “That sounds like some kind of space soap opera.”

“Well, there are these twins…”

She laughed. “Definitely a soap opera. All right, I’m in. I’ll meet you in the media room in ten minutes.”

Rose winked at her. “I’ll have the ice cream.”

The Doctor looked at the console. “I can do this later,” he decided. “Watching telly and eating ice cream for dinner sounds like more fun than rerouting the temporal stabiliser.”

oOoOoOoOo
After breakfast the next morning, the Doctor lifted his tools up onto the grating, then leveraged his body out from underneath the console. Martha and Rose were both on the jump seat, watching him expectantly.

“Everything’s back in perfect working order,” he told them. “Of course, the angels didn’t actually get into her, but still—it was good to take the opportunity to check her systems out.” He wiped his hands off on a greasy rag.

Once he was cleaned up, he set the coordinates carefully, making sure they would land in London after they met Sally Sparrow the first time. “There’s someone I’d like to go see,” he told Rose and Martha. “I think we owe Sally Sparrow a thank you, don’t you?” Their smiles were the only answer he needed, and he sent them flying through the Vortex towards April 2008.

When she landed, the Doctor peeked at the external monitor and bit back a grin. “Ah yes, Sparrow and Nightingale, Antiquarian Books and Rare DVDs. I think you’ll find they’re expecting us.”

He nodded to the door and Martha and Rose pushed it open, then looked back at him reproachfully. “You landed in their back office, Doctor,” Rose told him.

The Doctor could see a dumbfounded Larry Nightingale staring at them from the office doorway, and he waved cheerily, then motioned for the women to go on out.

“Hello there, Larry!” he chirped when he joined them.

“Doctor. Um, we weren’t… that is, we aren’t prepared for company…”

“Oh, that’s all right!” The Doctor waved his hand. “We aren’t really here to chat. Actually, I thought you might like to come with us for a bit.”

You did? Rose asked, and he nodded slightly.

Sally appeared in the doorway. “Come with you where, Doctor?”

Martha grinned. “Asking the wrong question, Sally Sparrow.”

“Of course. Come with you when?”

The Doctor stuck his hands in his coat pockets. “Well, it struck me that this all really started for the two of you when someone else was touched by an angel.” He nodded at Larry. “Your sister, Katherine Wainwright—nee Kathy Nightingale.”

Larry paled, but Sally’s eyes brightened. “Oh my god, Kathy? Do you mean it, Doctor? We could go back and see her without it causing any problems?”

He grinned at her. “I like you, Sally Sparrow. Asking the right questions already. We’ll have to tell Kathy that she can’t mention it to anyone, especially not in the letter she wrote you. Hey, maybe us going back for a visit is what will inspire her to write that letter in the first place.”

“I haven’t seen my sister in six months,” Larry finally said. “She’s the only family I’ve got—our parents died ages ago.”

Rose stepped forward. “You’d have to understand, this would be a one time visit. A chance to catch up, for all of you to see that you’re happy, and to say goodbye. Can you do that? Because if you can’t promise us to leave when we say it’s time, then we won’t go.”
One encounter with Reapers was more than enough for Rose Tyler. She didn’t want to scare or upset Larry and Sally, but they had to understand the stakes if they took this offer.

Sally looked at Larry. It was obvious she wanted to go, but she was letting him make the call.

Finally, he nodded. “Yeah. We’ll do it. Just let us put out the closed sign.”

The Doctor rocked back on his heels. “No need for that,” he told them. “We’ve got a time machine—I’ll have you back in five minutes.”

Sally looked at Rose and Martha, then nodded decisively. “I’ll put out the closed sign,” she agreed, clearly seeing the silent message in their eyes that the Doctor wasn’t quite as good at precision landings as he thought he was.

After discussing it with Sally and Larry, the Doctor set the coordinates for 1935. Based on the letter and photos Kathy had sent Sally, all of her children would be born by then, so if she and Larry slipped and mentioned them, they wouldn’t be giving any spoilers. But she would still be young enough that she felt like the Kathy they knew.

Watching the reunion was a bit awkward, Rose mused as she sipped tea from Kathy Wainwright’s best china. They didn’t know Kathy at all and barely knew Sally and Larry. As much as possible, they stayed out of the conversation, only speaking up when it seemed like someone might be about to divulge information that should be kept a secret. The Doctor even let Sally explain what the Weeping Angels were, and how they’d sent Kathy back to 1920.

Their visit lasted a few hours. Having so recently had a second chance at a last conversation with her mum, Rose felt for Sally and Larry when they returned to the TARDIS, hand-in-hand.

“Kathy seemed pleased that you’re together,” she said, trying to break the silence.

Larry’s ears turned red. “Surprised, maybe,” he said. “She was there the first time we met, and I… let’s just say I didn’t make a stellar first impression.”

Sally chuckled. “Maybe not, but you made up for it,” she told him.

The TARDIS’ wheezing broke into the conversation, and Rose glanced over at the Doctor, who was leaning against the console. “We’ll be back in your shop in just a few minutes,” he told them. “Again, we really can’t thank you enough for all you did to help us out when we were in 1969.”

“This was a perfect thanks,” Sally said firmly.

Rose and the Doctor exchanged a glance. They both hated that the Nightingale/Sparrow family had to be split up at all, but they couldn’t fix that without causing a paradox.

“Well.” The Doctor nodded once. “If we’re ever in the area and looking for a rare DVD, we’ll be sure to stop by.”

Once Sally and Larry were gone, the Doctor leaned against the console with his arms crossed over his chest. Martha looked at him warily—she didn’t want to be the one to say they needed a break, but she really didn’t want to end up in the middle of a revolution or something.

To her surprise, the Doctor said, “I think we’ve earned a break, especially the two of you. There’s someplace I’ve been wanting to go, if you’re in the mood for a holiday.”
Martha smiled widely. “I’m absolutely in the mood for a holiday,” she assured him.

“Well then, why don’t you go pack a bag for a long weekend, and I’ll take us to a fancy resort.”

When everyone was back in the console room with packed bags, the Doctor grinned. “This place has something for all of us. It’s one of the fanciest resorts in the galaxy—they call it a leisure palace, actually. There’s a pool, hot tub, sauna, and all the other resort amenities.”

“Sounds a little boring for you, Doctor,” Rose teased.

“Right you are! But Midnight is the famous planet made of diamonds. You can take a tour to the sapphire waterfall—one of the seven wonders of the galaxy.”

Martha snorted. “Of course. You would pick a resort that has something odd you can explore. But as long as they’ve got a swimming pool and plenty of drinks with little umbrellas, I’m fine with you taking your tour to see the sapphire waterfall.”

But when they pushed the doors open and sunlight poured into the TARDIS, the Doctor groaned in disappointment. “Oh, this is not where I wanted to be!”

“Where are we?” Rose asked. “Not Midnight, I take it.”

“No, Midnight’s sun is xtonic. For some reason, the TARDIS landed us in Hawaii instead.”

Martha peered over the Doctor’s shoulder and took in the long expanse of pristine white sand. She and Rose exchanged a look, then then ducked around the Doctor on opposite sides and darted out into the sun.

“Okay,” Martha said, holding her arms out and tipping her head back. “For once, I love that your ship never lands where you tell her to.”

Chapter End Notes

That’s it for Blink. Take a deep breath, gang, because there’s no breather chapter before we hit Utopia. And you know that once the Master arc starts, it doesn’t stop until it's over.
The next few chapters lay the groundwork for some serious changes during the Year That Never Was. See if you catch the ones in this chapter.

They stayed in Hawaii for two weeks before returning to the TARDIS, exploring the islands just like they would an alien planet. The Doctor was in his element, surrounded by new things and places to discover. Martha was thrilled the TARDIS had landed them in 2010, allowing her to relax fully for the first time in months.

In the end, it was Rose who pressed them to leave. “I want to see alien skies again, Doctor. I want to meet non-humans and help people, and yeah, maybe run if we have to.”

“What about you, Martha?” the Doctor asked. “Ready to travel again?”

Martha smiled easily. “Yeah, why not?” she said. “We can’t stay on holiday for the rest of our lives, can we?”

The next few weeks were a whirlwind of alien landscapes and cultures, with a few stops in human history for fun. They went to Houston to watch the moon landing, saved no fewer than three planets from destruction or political turmoil, and heard the music of the Singing Towers of Darillium.

Rose didn’t realise how long they’d gone without a break until she found Martha curled up in the library, fast asleep. Even in her sleep, exhaustion lined her mouth—a sure sign they’d pushed her too hard.

She set her jaw and tracked down the Doctor, finally finding him in his work room. “Four weeks,” she said without preamble.

He looked at her and put his tools down. “What?”

“That’s how long it’s been since we had a day off. Just a day to rest and recharge.”

His eyes shuttered, and Rose wondered how she’d missed his obvious agitation. She sighed and ran her hand through her hair. Probably because I was so glad to be home and feeling like myself, I just ignored it, she admitted.

She reached for his hand. “What are you running from, Doctor?”

He was silent for a long moment, and she waited for him to gather his thoughts. “Can’t you feel it, Rose?” he said finally. “There’s something coming… something big. We can’t avoid it forever, but I wasn’t ready for yet another trip that high on the danger scale.”

Rose could feel it then, and a shiver went up her spine when she understood why the Doctor had been running. The feeling that time would catch up with them if they stood still was almost unbearable. She wanted to go straight to the console room and send them off to yet another planet.

Still… She shook her head. “We’re running Martha ragged. Plus, I’m pretty sure it’s time to fill up
the TARDIS. Why don’t we go to Cardiff in the morning?” She offered him a teasing smile. “It’s been over a year since we’ve seen Jack, after all.”

He rolled his eyes. “How did we survive such a deprivation?” They were silent for a moment, then he said, “You’re right, of course. We’ll fill up tomorrow and spend the day in Cardiff resting.”

It was almost 10:00, ship’s time, when Martha joined them the next morning. The Doctor felt a pang of guilt when he realised how exhausted she must have been to sleep so late, though overall she seemed more rested than she had in the last few days.

“The TARDIS is running low on fuel,” he told her as she sat down on the jump seat. “We thought we’d fill up, and then relax for the day.”

Rose pulled her phone out of her pocket and moved off to the edge of the console room. A moment later, the Doctor heard her teasing laughter and knew she’d connected with Jack.

“So where does a time and space ship fuel up, anyway?” Martha asked. “Is there a special petrol station?”

“In a manner of speaking.” The Doctor carefully set the space coordinates, then waited for Rose to get the date from Jack. “Cardiff.”

Rose walked back towards him, the phone held against her chest. “Jack says to tell you it’s Election Day. He wants to know where he should meet us.”

“Perfect. We won’t spoil the election results for Martha.” The Doctor adjusted the date coordinates and sent them into flight. “Tell him we’ll be on the Plass at noon.”

“Cardiff?” Martha repeated when Rose returned to her conversation.

“Yes!” The TARDIS landed with a soft thud, and the Doctor moved around the console, twisting the dials to open up the engines. “Cardiff is built on a rift in time and space, just like California and the San Andreas Fault, but the rift bleeds energy. Every now and then I need to open up the engines, soak up the energy and use it as fuel.” He looked at the monitor and raised his eyebrows. “Should only take twenty seconds. The rift’s been active.”

“Had your hands full, Jack?” Their friend had been vague about his work, but the Doctor was pretty sure it had something to do with the rift.

“Wait a minute.” Martha leaned on the console and put her other hand on her waist. “They had an earthquake in Cardiff a couple of years ago. Was that you?”

“Bit of trouble with the Slitheen.” The Doctor kept his eyes on the monitor so he could close everything back up when the engines were full. “A long time ago. Lifetimes.” He tugged on his ear. “I was a different man back then.”

Rose laughed, and he pulled a face at her. The light on the console changed from yellow to green, and he closed everything up. “Finito. All powered up.”

Three sharp raps on the door and an uncomfortable tightening at the base of his skull announced Jack’s arrival. “And that would be our guest. Martha, get the door, would you?”

Martha looked at the door and back at him. “I’ve lived with you for over seven months, and not one
person has ever knocked on that door.”

“That’s because the TARDIS has a perception filter,” Rose explained. “People don’t even notice her, unless they’re looking for her. And Jack used to live with us, so…”

Martha shook her head and opened the door. The Doctor rolled his eyes when Jack looked her up and down.

“Captain Jack Harkness. And who are you?”

“Martha Jones.” Even from where he stood, the Doctor could see the blush staining Martha’s cheeks.

Jack grinned at her. “Nice to meet you, Martha Jones.”

The Doctor came around to stand beside Rose at the top of the ramp, looking up at Jack. “Oh, don’t start.”

“I was only saying hello.”

Martha looked between them. “I don’t mind.”

Jack winked at her, then stepped into the TARDIS. A grin split his face when he spotted Rose. “Rosie!” he hollered and jogged up the ramp, sweeping her into a hug.

“Oh, it’s good to see you, Jack!” she said, wrapping her arms tight around him. She laughed out loud when Jack picked her up and swung her around in a circle.

The Doctor cleared his throat when it didn’t seem like Jack was inclined to let Rose go any time that century. The jealousy was more a habit now than anything—he trusted both Jack and Rose implicitly. Jack set Rose on her feet and took a step back, the same amused smirk on his face that he’d always worn when the Doctor’s “captain envy” had been too obvious to be mistaken for anything else.

“Good to see you, Doctor.”

“And you, Captain.”

The two men shook hands, then the Doctor watched in bemusement as Jack’s eyes widened, and he held the Doctor’s hand up to the light.

_Ah. My wedding ring._

“You finally did it!” Jack crowed. “When did this happen?”

Rose laced her fingers through the Doctor’s. “The day after we last saw you, actually. About fourteen months ago, in linear time.”

The only warning the Doctor and Rose had before everything went pear-shaped was a sudden sense of queasiness coming from the TARDIS. Before they could get to the console to see what was wrong, the time rotor started chugging, and they left Cardiff behind.

Rose and Martha both grabbed onto struts while the Doctor stumbled towards the console, tripping once when the TARDIS his a particularly bad patch of turbulence.

“What’s going on?” Jack said as he pulled himself to his feet and moved to stand with the Doctor at the console.
“Remember what I said about how your… special problem feels to Rose and me?” the Doctor asked.

Jack raised his eyebrows and looked at Rose. “You didn’t mention Rose could feel it too, but yeah.”

The Doctor used his foot to brace himself against the console and pulled the monitor around so he could figure out where she was taking them. “Well, imagine you’re a sentient time ship who knows exactly how time should flow, and you’re suddenly carrying an impossible man.”

Rose pushed herself off from the strut and staggered over to the Doctor’s side, resting her hands on the console. A moment later, he felt her trying to communicate with the TARDIS, to regain control of their flight, but the ship wasn’t listening.

Fuses shorted out and sparked overhead. The Doctor waved ineffectually at the smoke as he stared at the Gallifreyan figures on the monitor.

“We’re accelerating into the future,” he narrated, his eyes widening as the numbers indicating their temporal trajectory continued to climb. “The year one billion. Five billion. Five trillion. Fifty trillion?” He squinted in disbelief when he finally realised where they were going. “What? The year one hundred trillion? That’s impossible.”

“Why? What happens then?” Martha asked.

The Doctor moved his lips a few times before sound came out. “We’re going to the end of the universe.”

“This is not my fault!” Jack insisted as the ship rocked through temporal turbulence.

The Doctor shot him a sideways glare, then instantly regretted it. Hard as it was to believe, Jack’s unique temporal signature was actually more nauseating if he only caught a glimpse of it, rather than looking at him head-on.

He fixed a steady gaze on his friend, and his queasiness eased. “If you have a different explanation for why our TARDIS just flung herself past the edge of all knowledge, I’d love to hear it.”

After the rocky trip, the landing was anticlimactically gentle. “Well, we’ve landed,” the Doctor said quietly.

Rose looked up at him, her forehead drawn into a deep furrow. “So, what’s out there?”

The Doctor shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Martha laughed uneasily. “Say that again. That’s rare.”

“Not even the Time Lords came this far,” he mumbled, still trying to figure out how, exactly, they’d ended up in what should have been an impossible place to land. The collapse of reality at the end of the universe should have made the time too unstable for the TARDIS to get a lock on it. “We should leave. We should go. We should really, really go.”

Rose was at the door before the Doctor got the last sentence out. “If you’re done being all dramatic, why don’t we take a look outside?”

Jack looked at his friends, not bothering to hide the laughter in his eyes. “She’s good for you,” he told the Doctor.
“Always has been, Jack.”

At the same time, Rose countered with, “He’s good for me, too.”

The Doctor smiled at her and grabbed his coat from the strut. “Well, are we all ready?” he asked as he pulled it on.

It was dark outside, and Jack had a feeling it wasn’t because it was night. If this was the end of the universe, then it stood to reason that most of the stars had probably already gone out, leaving the last inhabitable planet in perpetual night.

The Doctor and Rose took the lead, and Jack grinned when he saw they were holding hands, just like they always had. He followed Martha out the door, making sure to pull it shut behind him.

He took a quick moment to assess his surroundings. Huge rock formations dotted the terrain. Before the sun had (presumably) burnt out, the region probably had an arid climate, based on the scrubby bushes growing in the clay-based soil.

“So, you used to travel with the Doctor?” Martha asked as they picked a path through the scrub.

Despite having come to terms with his life, the past tense stung. “I still would be, if it weren’t for the Daleks.”

From her swiftly indrawn breath, Jack gathered that the newest companion had already met the Doctor’s oldest enemy.

“See, we were transmatted to this satellite called the Game Station—imagine a studio where all your favourite reality shows are filmed, only if you lose, instead of being kicked out of the house or whatever, you die.”

“Sometimes I think that’s what reality shows are going to be in the future,” Martha muttered.

“Well, you’re not wrong,” Jack said bluntly. “But anyway, what we didn’t know was that the whole Game Station was really a front the Daleks were using to build their army again.”

The Doctor’s shoulders tensed, and Jack decided to skip over the next several parts of the story.

“The Doctor planned to set off a delta wave that would end the Daleks once and for all. I took a team into the station to hold the Daleks off while the Doctor worked, and we got cut off from each other. Things got pretty bad,” he said, bypassing the part where he died, “and then the next thing I knew, I heard the TARDIS taking off.”

“What?” Martha exclaimed.

“So there I was, stranded in the year 200,100, ankle deep in Dalek dust, without my ride. But I had this.” He tapped his left wrist. “I used to be a Time Agent. It’s called a Vortex manipulator.” He pointed at the Doctor. “He’s not the only one who can time travel.”

The Doctor pivoted and pointed at the Vortex manipulator. “Oh, excuse me. That is not time travel,” he said derisively. “It’s like, I've got a sports car and you’ve got a space hopper.”


“All right, so I bounced.” Jack flashed Martha a cheeky grin. “I thought 21st century, the best place to find the Doctor, except that I got it a little wrong. Arrived in 1869, this thing burnt out, so it was
“Told you,” the Doctor said quietly.

“Oh, hush,” Rose remonstrated. “Let Jack tell his story without reminding everyone how much better your equipment is than his.”

Jack couldn’t resist that opening. “You might not say that if you’d ever actually seen my equipment, Rosie.”

“Oh!” the Doctor protested. “D’you mind not coming on to my bond mate while I’m standing right here?”

_Bond mate?_ Jack blinked at the term. He knew the Doctor was telepathic, and he knew what bonding meant to a telepathic race. He filed the information aside to think about later and shot a suggestive grin at the Doctor.

“Does that mean I can come on to her when you’re not standing right there?”

The Doctor sniffed. “Well, I know she won’t take you up on the offer, and at least then I wouldn’t have to listen to it.”

Jack grinned. “You know, normally I’d be offended that you think she’s so immune to my charms, but I happen to know you’re right.” _Plus it’s sweet how much you trust each other._

He shook his head and brought the conversation back to the original subject. “Anyway, as I was saying—I had to live through the entire twentieth century waiting for a version of him that would coincide with me.”

Martha looked up at him, and he knew she was starting to piece the truth together. Maybe.

“But that makes you more than one hundred years old.”

The years weighed on him, as they always did when he let himself think about how long he’d been stuck on Earth, and he fell back on humour to ease the tightness in his chest. “And looking good, don’t you think?” He added a smirk for Martha, trying to erase the unease from her face.

“But the thing is, how come you left him behind, Doctor?” Martha asked boldly.

“It’s a long story, Martha,” Jack said, suddenly sorry he’d brought it up. He didn’t want the Doctor to think he still resented the way they’d left him behind. He’d had a year to think about what the Doctor and Rose had told him, and he’d finally accepted it.

Martha didn’t pick up on his subtle hint to drop the subject. “Is that what happens, though, seriously?” she pressed. “Do you just get bored with us one day and disappear?”

“Oh, why does everyone always ask that?” the Doctor complained. The fact that his behaviour might look like that to an outside observer made him squirm a little inside. He didn’t just get _bored_ with his companions! Things changed, that was all.

Rose raised an eyebrow. “When you meet a companion who’s been left behind, it does tend to be the next question to come to mind,” she pointed out drily.

The Doctor dropped her hand and shoved his into his pockets. “Trust me when I say that most of my companions have been glad to leave when we parted ways. Jack and Sarah Jane are exceptions to
the rule.” The whole conversation was an unpleasant reminder of all the times he’d been left, rather than the one doing the leaving.

Rose slipped her hand through the crook of his arm and leaned her head against his shoulder as they walked. I’m never going to leave you, she promised again.

“Are they always like this?” Jack asked Martha.

“Pretty much,” she said. “They have their moments, but overall, they’re the most disgustingly happy couple I’ve ever seen.”

Most of the Doctor’s discomfort with the conversation melted away with that assessment. He was happy, now that he had Rose. He hummed as they approached the edge of cliff.

The sight below took his breath away. Light shone up from the surface, illuminating a massive structure that seemed to grow out of the cliff walls.

“Is that a city?” Martha asked.

The Doctor considered for a moment; the word city didn’t feel quite right. “A city or a hive, or a nest, or a conglomeration.” He felt Rose’s amusement with his rambling and pinched her side gently, making her giggle before he continued. “It’s like it was grown. But look, there.” He pointed at the ledges and bridges built into the structure. “That’s like pathways, roads? Must have been some sort of life, long ago.”

“What killed it?” Rose asked quietly.

“Time. Just time. Everything’s dying now. All the great civilisations have gone. This isn’t just night,” the Doctor said, pointing at the dark sky. “All the stars have burned up and faded away… into nothing.”

“They must have an atmospheric shell,” Jack observed. “We should be frozen to death.”

The Doctor raised an eyebrow when he included himself in that statement, but he didn’t debate it. If Jack wanted to hide the fact that he couldn’t die, he wouldn’t out him.

Martha stared down into the empty city. “What about the people? Does no one survive?”

The Doctor shrugged. “I suppose we have to hope life will find a way.”

“Like that, you mean?”

The Doctor looked where Rose was pointing. A man was running through the city, pursued by a large group carrying spears.

“Human!” one of the pursuers yelled.

The Doctor narrowed his eyes. “Is it me, or does that look like a hunt?” He and Rose ran full tilt down the steep embankment, the loose gravel under their feet sending them sliding. “Come on!” he called out to their friends.

Jack came abreast with them before they reached the man and grabbed him in his arms. “I’ve got you.”

The man flailed and looked back over his shoulder. “They’re coming! They’re coming!”
Jack pushed the man behind him and pulled out his service revolver.

“Jack, don’t you dare!” the Doctor ordered.

He glared at the Doctor, but there wasn’t time to get into an ethical debate on times it was appropriate to use deadly force. Instead, he aimed the weapon up and fired warning shots in the air. The tribesmen skidded to a halt and looked at them fearfully. *All right, so maybe deadly force wasn’t necessary this time,* Jack admitted grudgingly.

“What the hell are they?” Martha exclaimed.

The man they’d rescued looked around frantically. “There’s more of them. We’ve got to keep going.”

“We’ve got a ship nearby,” the Doctor told him. “It’s safe. It’s not far, just over there.” He nodded in the direction they’d come.

More tribesmen appeared on the cliff, and Rose grabbed the Doctor’s hand. “Or maybe not.”

Jack kept his eyes on the incoming group, willing to shoot if need be, no matter what the Doctor thought about it.

“We’re close to the silo,” the man told them. “If we get to the silo, then we’re safe.”

“Silo?” the Doctor asked.

“Silo.” Jack adjusted his hold on his gun.

“Silo for me,” Martha agreed.

“That makes it unanimous,” Rose said. “Let’s go!”

The five of them ran pell-mell across the hard packed earth. The pounding footsteps behind them grew fainter as they put distance between themselves and their pursuers, but Jack wouldn’t feel safe until they were indoors.

Finally they saw lights on the horizon and then a large compound enclosed by a high fence and protected by armed guards.

“It’s the Futurekind!” the stranger shouted when they were within earshot. “Open the gate!”

“Show me your teeth!” the guard ordered. “Show me your teeth! Show me your teeth!”

“Show him your teeth,” the man they’d rescued urged.

They all bared their teeth. “Human!” the guard shouted. “Let them in! Let them in!” The gate opened, and all five of them ran inside. “Close! Close! Close!” The gate closed just in time to keep the Futurekind out.

The sharp staccato of machine gun fire caught Jack’s ear, and he spun back around. The guard was holding his weapon on the Futurekind, who were lurking as near to the fence as they dared.


“Go back to where you came from,” the guard ordered. “I said, go back. Back!”
“Oh, don’t tell him to put his gun down,” Jack admonished the Doctor when the guard brandished his weapon again.

“He’s not my responsibility,” the Doctor protested.

Jack raised his eyebrows at him. “Doc, I haven’t been your responsibility in 140 years,” he said acerbically.

“Kind watch you,” the tribesman said, and his fellows behind him made an eerie buzzing noise. “Kind hungry.” They stared in through the fence for another moment, then he flung his arm back, and his tribe turned and walked away.

“Thanks for that,” the Doctor told the guard as they turned away from the fence.

“Right. Let’s get you inside,” the guard replied and started for the building behind them.

“My name is Padra Toc Shafe Cane,” the man they’d saved told theguard. “Tell me. Just tell me, can you take me to Utopia?”

Jack raised his eyebrows at the question, but even more at the guard’s answer.

“Oh yes, sir. Yes, I can.”

As they walked away from the fence, Jack wrapped an arm around the Doctor’s shoulders. Seeing him again had brought to mind something he’d wondered more than once over the last year.

“Hey, Doc. Out of curiosity, what did you ever do with my old Doctor detector?”

The Doctor shot him an exasperated look. “There was only one safe thing to do, Jack. I burned it, in the way all Time Lord bodies should be burned.”

“But it was only a hand!”

“It was my hand,” the Doctor retorted, and Jack heard a gasp from Martha. “The only way to make sure no one could use it against me was to destroy it.”

Jack shrugged. “I guess you’re right. I sure am glad I didn’t have it weighing me down as we were running from the Futurekind.”

The Doctor stuck his hands into his pockets and shot Jack a sly look. “Oh, I’d have been glad to lend you a hand.”

Rose and Martha groaned at the pun, and Jack cuffed the Doctor lightly on the back of the head as they entered the building. “You think you’re so funny.”

The guard took them to a slim black man. “Lieutenant Atillo! These are the humans who just came in through the gate.”

The Doctor held his hand out, and after looking at it for a second, Lieutenant Atillo shook it. “I’m the Doctor. And this is my wife Rose, and our friends Martha and Jack.”

The Lieutenant’s eyes sharpened. “A medical doctor?”

The Doctor smiled genially. “A doctor of everything, really,” he said. “What can I say? I like
“studies.” He rocked back on his heels. “But if you’re the commander of this facility, you must have the authority to send people out to collect food and water. We left something out there when we went to help poor Padra here.”

“What is it, Doctor?”

The Doctor leaned forward a little. “It looks like a box, a big blue box. I’m sorry, but I really need it back. It’s stuck out there.”

Padra interrupted before Lieutenant Atillo could answer the Doctor’s request. “I’m sorry, but my family were heading for the silo. Did they get here? My mother is Kistane Shafe Cane. My brother’s name is Beltone.”

Atillo nodded, weary compassion lining his face. “The computers are down but you can check the paperwork. Creet!” A young boy with blond curly hair poked his head around the corner. “Passenger needs help.”

Creet joined them, a clipboard in hand. “Right. What do you need?”

Padra walked towards him, and Atillo turned back to the Doctor.

“A blue box, you said,” he said, his voice raising at the end to almost make it a question.


“We’re driving out for the last water collection. I’ll see what I can do.”

Sharp relief flowed between the Doctor, Rose, and the TARDIS. “Thank you,” the Doctor said fervently, and Atillo nodded once before leaving.

Creet flipped the papers back on his clipboard and started for a corridor, with Padra on his heels.

“Sorry, but how old are you?” Martha asked.

“Old enough to work,” the boy said matter-of-factly. “This way.”

Rose’s hand slipped into the Doctor’s as they followed Creet through the corridors. Makeshift beds lined the way, and pictures hung on the walls above nearly every berth.

This is the end of the universe? Rose asked.

The Doctor looked down at her. Everything has to end sometime, Rose.

I was just thinking that no matter how far from home we are, people are still the same. These people are dressed in rags, sleeping on the floor, but they’re still clinging to family.

Ahead of them, Creet was calling out for Padra’s family. “Kistane Shafe Cane. Kistane Shafe Cane. Kistane and Beltone Shafe Cane? We’re looking for a Kistane and Beltone Shafe Cane.”


Around them, people shook their heads in answer to Creet and Padra’s calls. Sympathy shone in their tired eyes, and the Doctor shook his head, marvelling at how… how human they still remained.

“Anyone? Kistane and Beltone Shafe Cane? Anyone know the Shafe Cane family? Anyone called
Shafe Cane?”

“It’s like a refugee camp,” Martha murmured.

“Stinking,” Jack exclaimed, then quickly told the nearest man, “Oh, sorry. No offence. Not you.”

“Don’t you see that?” The Doctor shook his head in amazement. “The ripe old smell of humans. You survived. Oh, you might have spent a million years evolving into clouds of gas, and another million as downloads,” he allowed, “but you always revert to the same basic shape. The fundamental human.”

Rose squeezed his hand. “Only you, Doctor, would find the hope in the stench of humanity.”

“Well, it’s the end of the universe and here you are,” he said. “Indomitable! That’s the word. Indomitable! Ha!”

“Is there a Kistane Shafe Cane?”

Twenty feet away, a woman rose to her feet. “That’s me.”

“Mother?” Padra ran to her.

“Oh, my God. Padra.”

The Shafe Canes hugged while the time travellers looked on. “It’s not all bad news,” Martha said.

A door caught the Doctor’s eye, mostly because he could tell it was locked, which meant whatever was on the other side was of some value. He pulled out his sonic and tried to unlock it, but the half deadlock seal was enough to keep the door from opening.

He looked around for Jack and found him—of course—chatting up a bloke. “Stop it,” he told his friend. “Give us a hand with this. It’s half deadlocked.” Jack joined him at the controls. “I need you to overwrite the code. Let’s find out where we are.”

Rose crossed her arms and watched, tapping her fingers nervously against her elbow. Jack got the door open just as the Doctor turned around, and she nearly jumped out of her skin when he almost fell into the cavernous room beyond.

Jack grabbed him by the coat and dragged him back. “Gotcha.”

“Thanks,” the Doctor said.

“How did you cope without me?” Jack asked cheekily.

“You have no idea, Jack,” Rose said as she took the Doctor’s hand. “He’s jeopardy friendly, this one.”

“Now that is what I call a rocket,” Martha said, interrupting the Doctor’s indignant exclamation.

They gazed into the silo, finally realising what they were looking at. “They’re not refugees, they’re passengers,” the Doctor said.

Rose remembered what Padra had said. “He said they were going to Utopia.”

“The perfect place,” the Doctor mused. “Hundred trillion years, it’s the same old dream. You recognise those engines?” he asked Jack, looking several storeys down to the engine chamber at the
“Nope,” Jack said. “Whatever it is, it’s not rocket science. But it’s hot, though.”

“Nope,” the Doctor agreed. They all stepped back, and Jack closed the doors. “But if the universe is falling apart, what does Utopia mean?”

An older gentleman dressed in an old-fashioned white dress shirt with flowing sleeves, a black waistcoat, and a black cravat approached them. He looked back and forth between the two men, finally pointing at Jack.

“The Doctor?”

“That’s me,” the Doctor corrected.

“Good!” the gentleman said, then grabbed the Doctor’s hand and dragged him down the hall. The Doctor snagged Rose with his other hand, and they tripped along after the stranger, who said nothing but the word good, over and over.

“It’s good apparently,” the Doctor said to Jack and Martha as they stumbled down the corridor.

“I’m Professor Yana,” the man said. “I could use another scientific mind working with me on the engine project.”

He pulled them into a laboratory, past a blue woman in a lab coat who greeted them. “Chan, welcome, tho.” The tentacles on her face waved slightly in salutation.

Rose let go of the Doctor’s hand and stood next to the alien woman, watching Professor Yana’s excitement with some bemusement. She’d seen scientists get starstruck over meeting the Doctor, but normally they fell all over themselves like this when they were stuck on their projects and hoped a new mind would find the solution. She had a sinking feeling the rocket wasn’t as ready to fly as Lieutenant Atillo thought.

“Now, this is the gravitissimal accelerator,” the professor said, pointing to a flat device. “It’s past its best, but it works.”

Martha joined them, and the alien woman greeted her in the same way she had the Doctor and Rose, while Professor Yana ran over to another scientific gadget of some kind.

“Hello,” Martha said. “Who are you?”

“Chan, Chantho, tho.” She bobbed her head, a smile on her face.

Jack took her hand, his trademark smile on his face. “Captain Jack Harkness.”

The Doctor looked at Jack over the rim of his glasses. “Stop it.”

“Can’t I say hello to anyone?”

Chantho smiled bashfully. “Chan, I do not protest, tho.”

“Maybe later, Blue.” Jack winked at her, and she turned a slightly brighter shade of blue. Then Jack clapped his hands and moved over to stand with the Doctor and Professor Yana. “So, what have we got here?”

Rose and Martha followed Jack into the centre of the room, where tubing fed up into the ceiling.
“And all this feeds into the rocket?” the Doctor asked, looking up at the apparatus.

Professor Yana sighed heavily. “Yeah, except without a stable footprint, you see, we’re unable to achieve escape velocity.” He looked around at his project, gesturing to emphasise his words. “If only we could harmonise the five impact patterns and unify them, well, we might yet make it. What do you think, Doctor? Any ideas?”

Rose knew the Doctor had no clue what any of these pieces were, but he looked around some more, trying to find something he could offer, some bit of reassurance to this man who was looking at him so hopefully.

“Well, er, basically…” He turned a circle, then looked back at Professor Yana. “Sort of, not a clue.”

“Nothing?” Professor Yana asked incredulously.

“I’m not from around these parts,” the Doctor said apologetically. “I’ve never seen a system like it. Sorry.”

Yana turned away dejectedly. “No, no. I’m sorry. It's my fault. There’s been so little help.”

The Doctor rubbed at the back of his neck and went to sit down with Rose and Martha on the side of the room. “I really am sorry though,” he said. “It isn’t often I run into something I don’t understand the basics of. My people were very advanced.”

“Your people?” Yana repeated curiously. “I take it you’re not human, then.”

The Doctor nodded. “Time Lord, last of.” He looked over at Rose. “Well, last two, technically.”

Jack gawped at that bombshell, and Rose waved weakly at him, trying to convey that she’d explain later. He nodded, and they both looked back at the Doctor and Professor Yana.

For the first time Rose could remember, the name Time Lord got no reaction from their audience. The Doctor looked at Yana and Chantho, confused. “Heard of them? Legend or anything?” Yana and Chantho looked at each other and shook their heads. “Not even a myth? Blimey, end of the universe is a bit humbling.”

Rose stifled her laughter.

“Chan, it is said that I am the last of my species too, tho,” Chantho offered.

The Doctor looked at her. “Sorry, what was your name?”

Yana answered before Chantho could. “My assistant and good friend, Chantho,” he introduced. “A survivor of the Malmooth. This was their planet, Malcassairo, before we took refuge.”

He frowned. “The city outside, that was yours?”

“Chan, the conglomeration died, tho.”


Rose cleared her throat and shook her head. The Doctor frowned for a moment, then turned back to Chantho.

“Oh, that was rude, wasn’t it? I should have said I’m sorry—and I am,” he told her quietly. “I know how it feels to be the last of your species.”
She bobbed her head. “Chan, most grateful, tho.”

“You’re even teaching him manners, Rosie?” Jack asked, nudging her in the side. “I’m impressed.”

“He’s a work in progress,” Rose said, flashing a teasing smile at the Doctor to ease the sting of her words. “This regeneration has been rude and not ginger, right from the start.”

“So what about those things outside?” Jack jerked his head towards the outside wall. “The Beastie Boys. What are they?”

Yana nodded and rocked back on his heels. “We call them the Futurekind, which is a myth in itself, but it’s feared they are what we will become, unless we reach Utopia.”

The Doctor nodded; Utopia was something of an obsession around this place. “And Utopia is?” he asked finally.

“Oh, every human knows of Utopia. Where have you been?” the professor asked incredulously.

The Doctor shrugged. “Bit of a hermit.”

“A hermit with friends, and a wife?” Yana looked pointedly at Rose.

“Hermits United,” the Doctor said automatically, then rambled on. “We meet up every ten years and swap stories about caves. It’s good fun, for a hermit.” The professor was smirking at him, so he quickly changed the subject from his transparent lie. “So, um, Utopia?”

The professor crooked his finger at them, and led them to a monitor with a gravitational field navigation system. The Doctor sat down in front of the display, staring at the blinking red dot.

“The call came from across the stars, over and over again. Come to Utopia. Originating from that point.”

“Where is that?” the Doctor asked.

“Oh, it’s far beyond the Condensate Wilderness, out towards the Wildlands and the Dark Matter reefs, calling us in. The last of the humans, scattered across the night.”

Rose leaned over his shoulder, taking in the display. “What do you think’s out there?” she asked the professor.

“We can’t know. A colony, a city, some sort of haven? The Science Foundation created the Utopia Project thousands of years ago to preserve mankind, to find a way of surviving beyond the collapse of reality itself. Now perhaps they found it. Perhaps not. But it’s worth a look, don’t you think?”

“Oh, yes.” The Doctor beamed up at the professor, then looked back at the monitor. “And the signal keeps modulating, so it’s not automatic. That’s a good sign someone’s out there. And that’s, oh, that’s a navigation matrix. So you can fly without stars to guide you.”

He realised suddenly that the professor was being unusually silent. When he looked up at the human, the man was clearly in some kind of pain, not even registering what the Doctor was saying.

“Professor?” he queried. “Professor? Professor!”

The professor gasped and his eyes flew open. “I, er, ahem, right, that’s enough talk,” he said brusquely, walking away from the Doctor and his friends. “There’s work to do. Now if you could leave, thank you.”
The Doctor got up and followed behind him slowly. “You all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine,” the professor said dismissively. “And busy.”

The Doctor leaned over a control panel and watched Professor Yana. He’d picked up on Rose’s suspicions earlier, and now he was positive she was right. “Except that rocket’s not going to fly, is it?”

Yana kept his back to him so the Doctor couldn’t see his face, but he watched the man’s shoulders hitch like he was trying to control his breathing.

“This footprint mechanism thing,” the Doctor continued, “it’s not working.”

The professor wheeled around. “We’ll find a way,” he insisted.

“You’re stuck on this planet,” the Doctor countered. Thinking of all the people he’d met, and all the things they’d said about Utopia, he realised something else. “And you haven’t told them, have you? That lot out there, they still think they’re going to fly.”

The professor sank down into a chair and looked around at his lab in quiet despair. “Well, it’s better to let them live in hope.”

“Quite right, too.” The Doctor took his coat off, then handed it to Rose and walked around the console. “And I must say, Professor er, what was it?” he asked

“Yana.”

“Professor Yana. This new science is well beyond me, but all the same, a boost reversal circuit, in any time frame, must be a circuit which reverses the boost.” He picked up a cable and pulled his sonic screwdriver out of his pocket. “So, I wonder, what would happen if I did this?”

Using his rediscovered talent of reversing the polarity, he directed a quick burst of the sonic at the circuit box, then flipped a switch on the other side of it. Sirens went off throughout the silo, alerting everyone that the engines were working and the rocket was ready to take off.

Chantho glowed with excitement. “Chan, it’s working, tho!”

Professor Yana stood up and turned around in amazement. “But how did you do that?”

The Doctor grinned and bounced on the balls of his feet. “Oh, we’ve been chatting away, I forgot to tell you. I’m brilliant.”
“All passengers prepare for boarding,” Lieutenant Atillo ordered over the PA system. “I repeat, all passengers prepare for immediate boarding. Destination, Utopia.”

Martha watched the Doctor, the professor, and Jack rush around the engine controls, putting the last pieces in place. Chantho showed her and Rose how to slide the circuit boards into place, but with three of them working, they soon finished.

“Chan, we have more circuit cards in storage, tho.” Chantho started for the door and looked back over her shoulder. “Chan, I would be most grateful for your help carrying them, tho.”

“Yeah, sure,” Martha said, and Rose nodded her agreement. Chantho led them to a storage room that was no bigger than a cupboard and loaded them each up with a stack of the cards.

They were on their way back to the lab when Martha caught sight of the boy they’d talked to earlier. “Excuse me. Hey, what was your name?” She looked up at the ceiling, trying to recall. “Creet.”

He stared at her with wide, blue eyes. “That’s right, miss.”

“Do you have a family, Creet?” Rose asked. “Mum, dad, maybe a brother or sister?”

“No, miss.” Creet shook his head. “There’s just me.”

Sadness swept over Martha, along with sympathy for the orphaned boy. “Well, good luck.” She looked around at the passengers filing through the corridor. “What do you think it’s going to be like, in Utopia?”

Creet’s eyes glowed. “My mum used to say the skies are made of diamonds.”

“Good for her,” Martha said. Creet’s enthusiasm curtailed the pity she’d felt for him earlier. “Go on, off you go. Get your seat.” She patted him on the head as he walked by. If humans carried that kind of optimism with them to Utopia, she had a feeling they’d do well.

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Working on the wiring with Professor Yana, the Doctor thought he caught a familiar scent. He brought the wire to his nose, then looked at the professor. “Is this—?”

Yana nodded. “Yes, gluten extract. Binds the neutralino map together.”

“That’s food.” The Doctor took his glasses off and looked at the matrix with a renewed sense of respect. “You’ve built this system out of food and string and staples. Professor Yana, you’re a genius.”

“Says the man who made it work,” the professor said self-deprecatingly.

The Doctor wouldn’t let him brush the compliment off. “Oh, it’s easy coming in at the end, but you’re stellar,” he insisted as they continued plugging connectors into ports. “This is, this is magnificent. And I don’t often say that because, well, because I’m me.”
“Well, even my title is an affectation,” Yana admitted. “There hasn’t been such a thing as a university for over a thousand years. I’ve spent my life going from one refugee ship to another.”

“If you’d been born in a different time, you’d be revered.” Yana laughed, and the Doctor pushed on. “I mean it. Throughout the galaxies.”

Yana looked up from his work. “Oh, those damned galaxies. They had to go and collapse. Some admiration would have been nice. Yes, just a little, just once.”

The words were lighthearted, but frustrated ambition lurked in the professor’s eyes. The Doctor was almost sorry he’d brought it up, since they both knew there was very little chance he’d get the acknowledgement he deserved.

“Well, you’ve got it now,” he said, then swiftly changed the subject. There was something the Doctor had been thinking about ever since he’d understood how the engine worked, and he couldn’t avoid it any longer. “But that footprint engine thing. You can’t activate it from onboard. It’s got to be from here. You’re staying behind.”

Yana nodded. “With Chantho. She won’t leave without me. Simply refuses.”

The Doctor looked up at him, full of admiration for the selflessness this human exhibited. “You’d give your life so they could fly.”

The professor scoffed. “Oh, I think I’m a little too old for Utopia. Time I had some sleep,” he added with a tired smile.

“Professor, tell the Doctor we’ve found his blue box,” Lieutenant Atillo said over the intercom.

“Ah!” the Doctor said, relief easing the fear he’d been trying to ignore.

“Doctor.” Jack beckoned him over to look at the monitor.

The sight of his TARDIS brought a smile to the Doctor’s face, and he patted Professor Yana on the back. “Professor, it’s a wild stab in the dark, but I may just have found you a way out.”

\[oOoOoOoOo\]

Rose felt the Doctor’s relief, and in reply to her query, he told her the TARDIS had been found. She sucked in a deep breath, and Martha looked at her, eyebrows raised.

“They’ve found the TARDIS.”

“Chan, what is the TARDIS, tho?”

“She’s our ship.” Rose shifted the stack of cards for a better hold. “We got separated from her when the Futurekind chased us, but Lieutenant Atillo’s men found her for us.”

Martha grinned. “Best news I’ve heard all day.”

The three of them jogged together back to the lab, weaving through the crowd of humans waiting to board the rocket. When they got there, the ship was already standing tall on the far side of the room. The doors were open, and a moment later, the Doctor skipped out carrying a cable under his arm.

“Extra power.” He hooked the cable up to the power supply for the engine. “Little bit of a cheat, but who’s counting? Jack, you’re in charge of the retro feeds.”
Rose set down her stack of cards and hurried into their ship, ignoring everyone else. The familiar hum calmed her, and she ran a hand over a strut. *Two months in 1913 and two months in 1969,* she told the TARDIS. *I wasn’t ready to lose you again.*

The hum changed pitch slightly, and Rose frowned, trying to place the emotion she was sensing. The harder she tried, the more the TARDIS pulled away, and she finally realised the ship didn’t want her to know what it was thinking.

*All right, Dear,* she said soothingly. *Keep your secrets.*

When she slipped back out into the lab, Jack was pointing at Martha. “Connect those circuits into the spar, same as that last lot. But quicker.”

“Ooo, yes, sir,” Martha muttered sarcastically as she went to do as he asked.

Rose crossed her arms and looked at Jack. “The Doctor isn’t the only one who can be rude,” she said mildly.

Jack flushed and cleared his throat. “Right. Sorry, Martha.”

Rose joined the Doctor, who was leaning over Professor Yana. The professor was sitting down in a chair, looking pale and tired. “You don’t have to keep working,” the Doctor told him. “We can handle it.”

The professor shook his head. “It’s just a headache. It’s just, just noise inside my head, Doctor. Constant noise inside my head.”

The Doctor and Rose exchanged a look—that sounded an awful like telepathy. “What sort of noise?” Rose asked.

He sighed. “It’s the sound of drums,” the professor said wearily. “More and more, as though it’s getting closer.”

“As though what’s getting closer, Professor?” Rose asked.

Professor Yana offered Rose a weak smile. “Why, the end of the universe of course, my dear.”

“When did it start?” the Doctor asked.

“Oh, I’ve had it all my life. Every waking hour. Still, no rest for the wicked.”

He got up from his seat, leaving the Doctor and Rose looking at each other. *What do you think?* Rose asked him.

*Telepathic signal implanted in his brain?* the Doctor suggested. *But why? If it’s counting down to the end of the universe, why hasn’t something happened before now?*

Rose had the distinct feeling that they were asking the wrong question, but she couldn’t figure out what the right question was, so she shrugged and followed the Doctor and the professor back over to the main control panel.

    oOoOoOoOo

Martha had sneered a bit at Jack’s imperious order, but in truth, she was glad to have something to do again. She and Chantho worked together to get the circuit boards into the rack.
“How long have you been with the professor?” Martha asked while they worked.

Chantho took the next circuit board from her. “Chan, seventeen years, tho.”

Martha’s eyes widened. “Blimey. A long time.”

“Chan, I adore him, tho.”

Her blue skin brightened just a bit, and Martha got the impression she was blushing. Then she realised she hadn’t seen a single sign of a relationship between the two.

“Oh right, and he…”

A green tinge appeared along Chantho’s cheeks. “Chan, I don’t think he even notices, tho.”

Martha nodded, then changed the subject, for Chantho’s sake. “Do you mind if I ask? Do you have to start every sentence with chan?”

Chantho’s eyes widened. “Chan, yes, tho.”

“And end every sentence with…”

“Chan, tho, tho.”

Martha tilted her head in consideration. “What would you happen if you didn’t?”

Chantho’s eyes widened. “Chan, that would be rude, tho,” she said, her voice nearly squeaking on the word rude. She laughed nervously, then looked around the room as if she were afraid someone else had overheard the suggestion.

Martha smiled slightly. “What, like swearing?” she asked, half-teasing.

But Chantho nodded earnestly. “Chan, indeed, tho,” she whispered.

“Go on, just once,” Martha encouraged.

“Chan, I can’t, tho.”

“Oh, do it for me.”

Chantho looked around the room, then back at Martha. “No.” Her eyes widened again, and she burst into a fit of giggles, her tentacles moving in time with her laughter.

They giggled together as they finished putting the circuit boards in place, then Martha wandered over to stand by the Doctor, looking down at the main control panel.

“Professor, are you getting me?” Lieutenant Atillo asked over the intercom.

The professor sat down in front of the terminal. “I’m here! We’re ready! Now all you need to do is connect the couplings, then we can launch.” His tone of voice changed from excitement to sharp annoyance. “God sake! This equipment. Needs rebooting all the time.”

Martha walked over to him. “Anything I can do? I’ve finished that lot.”

Professor Yana stood up, and Martha sat in his place. “Yes, if you could. Just press the reboot key every time the picture goes.”
“Certainly, sir.” Martha pressed the button. “Just don’t ask me to do shorthand.”

He patted her on the shoulder. “Right.”

Atillo’s face reappeared on the screen. “Are you still there?”

Yana leaned over her shoulder. “Ah, present and correct. Send your man inside. We’ll keep the levels down from here.”

Rose wandered over to stand next to Martha as the picture on the monitor faded out, then back in on a room bathed in red light. A man in a radiation suit walked inside, and Atillo shut the door quickly behind him.

“He’s inside. And good luck to him,” Atillo added fervently.

Yana hustled over to Jack. “Captain, keep the dials below the red.”

“Where is that room?” the Doctor asked, voicing the question they all were wondering.

“It’s underneath the rocket,” Professor Yana said. “Fix the couplings and the footprint can work. But the entire chamber is flooded with stet radiation.”

The two men walked over to watch the man’s progress on the monitor.

“Stet?” the Doctor asked. “Never heard of it.”

“You wouldn’t want to,” Yana said darkly. “But it’s safe enough, if we can hold the radiation back from here.”

The Doctor rested his hand on Rose’s shoulder, and the four of them watched the man work at one of five couplings, tapping a series of buttons and then opening a hatch. He reached inside and grabbed onto something they couldn’t see, and a moment later, the coupling dropped with a thunk.

Simultaneously, an alarm sounded. “It’s rising. Naught point two,” Yana muttered, then turned around to shout an order to Jack. “Keep it level!”

Jack nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Inside the chamber, the second coupling slotted into place. Rose had a knot in her stomach as she watched, and she’d just realised it was dread, not anticipation, when the lights went out in the lab and alarms sounded.

They all looked around apprehensively, and Chantho stated when they were all thinking. “Chan, we’re losing power, tho!”

The Doctor, the professor, and Jack all leapt into action, each of them working on a different part of the engine, trying to keep things going.

“Radiation’s rising!” Jack yelled. He looked at another panel, then back at the Doctor. “We’ve lost control!”

“The chamber’s going to flood,” the professor pronounced gloomily.

“Jack, override the vents!” the Doctor ordered.

Inside the chamber, the man continued to work on the couplings, even as Atillo shouted at him to get
out. Rose knew, with a horrible feeling in her gut, exactly what was going to happen to the poor man. He was too stunned by the alarm blaring around him to grasp what he needed to do, and in seconds, that shock would kill him.

Jack yanked a live cable out of the console, then grabbed a second from the control panel for the vents. “We can jump start the override.”

“Don’t! It’s going to flare!” the Doctor told him, just as Jack held the two live ends together.

Rose felt him die, then felt the odd bump in Time as it argued with the fact. Do you feel it? the Doctor asked. She took his hand and squeezed in answer.

Martha’s medical training kicked in, and she ran to Jack’s side. “I’ve got him.”

“Chan, don’t touch the cables, tho.” Chantho squatted down and tossed the cables out of the way while Martha started mouth-to-mouth on Jack.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Professor Yana said.

The Doctor put his hands in his pockets and looked down at their friends. “The chamber’s flooded with radiation, yes?”

Rose looked at the Doctor sharply, instantly understanding what he was going to suggest. He met her gaze evenly, and after a moment, she sighed and nodded. As much as she disliked the idea of exploiting Jack’s inability to die, it was their best chance to get the rocket working.

Professor Yana nodded glumly. “Without the couplings, the engines will never start. It was all for nothing.”

“Oh, I don’t know.”

Rose put a hand on Martha’s shoulder. “Martha, leave him.”

Martha fought as Rose pulled her away from Jack. “You’ve got to let me try.”

“No, really,” Rose told her. “Just leave him alone.”

They all looked down at Jack, lying dead on the floor for a few more seconds. “It strikes me, Professor,” the Doctor said, “you’ve got a room which no man can enter without dying. Is that correct?”

The professor snorted. “Yes.”

“Well…” the Doctor drawled.

Jack gasped for breath, and Rose nearly threw up at the grating sensation of him coming back to life.

The Doctor took his glasses off. “I think I’ve got just the man,” he concluded.

“Was someone kissing me?” Jack asked.

oOoOoOoOo

The Doctor and Jack ran through the base to the control room. “Lieutenant,” the Doctor shouted as they entered the room, “get on board the rocket! I promise you’re going to fly.”
“The chamber’s flooded,” Atillo protested.

“Trust me. We’ve found a way of tripping the system,” the Doctor lied.

Atillo looked at him sceptically, but stood up and walked slowly towards the door.

“Run!” the Doctor ordered, and he finally left the room.

The Doctor flipped a few switches on the control panel, then looked over at Jack, who was down to trousers and undershirt. “What are you taking your clothes off for?”

“I’m going in.”

“Well, by the looks of it, I’d say the stet radiation doesn’t affect clothing, only flesh,” the Doctor said sardonically.

“Well, I look good though,” Jack said, as only Jack could. He paused at the door and looked back at the Doctor. “I guess there’s something good about this after all.”

The Doctor nodded. “Yep. Good luck.”

Jack entered the chamber and closed the door quickly behind him. The Doctor followed, so he could watch through the window.

oOoOoOoOo

Rose clasped her hands together and pressed them to her lips. The danger she and the Doctor had sensed was here, now. Time was pulling them insistently in one direction. With a start, she realised it was the same feeling she’d gotten from the TARDIS when she’d said she wasn’t ready to lose her again.

She took a step towards the ship, but the TARDIS hummed a warning, and she backed away.

They watched on the monitor as Jack walked into the chamber, but then the signal was lost again. “We lost picture when that thing flared up,” Martha mumbled. She pressed the reboot button.

“Doctor, are you there?”

“Receiving, yeah,” the Doctor confirmed. “He’s inside.”

“And still alive?” Martha asked.

“Oh, yes,” the Doctor told her.

Professor Yana shook his head. “But he should evaporate. What sort of a man is he?”

Rose paced the lab, running her hands nervously through her hair. Every question of Professor Yana’s they answered pulled the timelines closer together.

“I’ve only just met him,” Martha answered. “The Doctor and Rose sort of travel through time and space and pick people up.” She shook her head. “God, I make us sound like stray dogs. Maybe we are.”

Rose stopped and stared at her. “How can you say that, Martha?” she asked, not bothering to hide the hurt in her voice. She knew this mostly came from Martha’s lingering confusion over Jack’s story, and for the first time, she really understood how the Doctor must have felt when she’d questioned him after meeting Sarah Jane. But still… “When have we ever treated you like less than a
friend?”

“You travel in time?” The hunger in Professor Yana’s eyes when he looked at Rose made her skin crawl.

“Don’t ask me to explain it.” Martha pointed over her shoulder at the TARDIS. “That’s a TARDIS, that box thing. The sports car of time travel, he says.”

But Professor Yana didn’t seem to be paying any attention to her. He’d turned around and was staring at the TARDIS. The avaricious gleam in his eyes made Rose want to climb into the ship and leave immediately, heedless of the people who were counting on them to get them to Utopia.

Something was going to happen, and she was stuck watching the temporal train wreck in progress.

The Doctor started to look back out the window after the brief conversation with Martha in the lab, but a wave of unease from Rose caught his attention. What is it, love? He was fairly sure he knew the answer, but he wondered if she’d figured it out for herself.

Do you feel that? she asked. That feeling like the timelines are sort of… pulling us, like we’re just along for the ride, and whatever is going to happen will happen, no matter what we do?

That’s a fixed point, Rose. I didn’t notice it right away because Jack throws off my time senses, but that’s what you’re sensing.

Then that’s why the TARDIS keeps telling me not to do certain things.

That’s it.

I don’t like it.

The Doctor chuckled wryly. Fixed points aren’t often pleasant, he told her. He gave her a quick mental caress, then he looked back at Jack.

The sly look on Jack’s face raised red flags right away, but he didn’t anticipate the question. “So… bond mate, huh?” Jack asked as he keyed in the code to open the casing around the first coupling.

He blinked. Oh. He had called Rose that earlier, hadn’t he? “Yes,” he answered warily.

“I’ve known lots of telepaths in my time.” The hatch popped open, and Jack grabbed the handle on the coupling. “And every one of them meant the same thing when they used that term.”

The question was obvious, but the Doctor wasn’t going to answer it without Rose’s permission. She hadn’t wanted to tell Jack about the changes to her physiology before, and even though he knew that was mostly because she’d been worn out from everything else that had happened that day, he still wanted the okay from her.

Rose? He didn’t bother to put the question into words, knowing Rose was watching everything on the monitor and could put the pieces together.

There was a short pause, then she said, Go ahead, Doctor.

“Ask your questions, Jack,” the Doctor told his friend as the first coupling dropped into place.

Jack looked at him with a raised eyebrow as he moved onto the next one. “Well, I think you just
answered one. She’s telepathic.”

“Yes.”

“She wasn’t always telepathic, though, was she?” Jack grunted as he tried to pull the coupling up. “I’m pretty sure I would have noticed that when I travelled with you before.”

“No, she wasn’t.” The Doctor rubbed at the back of his neck. “Do you remember what I told you about how you became…” He looked Jack up and down. “This?”

Jack rocked back on his heels as he worked on the coupling. “You said—” He grunted. “You said she looked into the Time Vortex.”

“She took it into herself and merged with the TARDIS. The TARDIS made her telepathic so they could communicate. The Vortex… the Vortex changed her physiology.”

The second coupling dropped into place and Jack punched in the code to open the third. “You told Professor Yana that you were the last two Time Lords in existence. I thought you were just including her because she’s your wife… Time Lord by marriage or something. But you meant it.”

The Doctor nodded. “I did. Rose’s basic anatomy is still human. But holding the Vortex inside her was killing her, and Time decided it wasn’t ready for her to die yet. The way it brought her back changed her.”

Jack whistled. “You know, Doc, not many people can say their spouse was once a goddess.”

The Doctor smiled. “Rose didn’t need to look into the heart of the TARDIS to be a goddess to me,” he said quietly.

Jack chuckled. “You guys always were the cutest couple I’ve ever known.”

The Doctor shrugged. He wasn’t trying to be cute or sweet; it was the honest truth.

“Anyway, her biological connection to time is very similar to mine. She can even feel and manipulate time the way I can. So, yes, Rose is a Time Lord; yes, she is telepathic; and yes, we have a telepathic bond.”

“What’s that like?” Jack grunted, still trying to get the third coupling to move. “I’ve been with a few people who could form a temporary connection during sex, but an actual bond…”

“Jack,” the Doctor said waringly.

Jack threw him a cheeky grin. “Can’t blame a guy for trying,” he said.

The Doctor didn’t say anything. It might not be unexpected for Jack to follow that line of questioning, but he still wasn’t going to give him any details about their sex life.

Jack caught on after a moment and nodded. “Right. So, Rose is a Time Lord. Does that mean she can regenerate?”

The Doctor took his glasses off and rubbed at his forehead. “We don’t know,” he said. “I think she can, most likely—she has the genetic code that Gallifreyans only received when we graduated from the Academy and became Time Lords. But there’s only one way to find out for sure.”

“And I don’t imagine you’re keen on letting her die.”
“Not exactly, no.”

The Doctor was done talking about his relationship with Rose. “Do you want to die?” he asked, changing the subject.

Jack grimaced as he pulled on the coupling. “Oh, this one’s a little stuck.”

“Jack?”

Jack looked at him and shook his head. “I thought I did. I don’t know. But this lot.” He grinned with the same zest for life he’d always shown. “You see them out here surviving, and that’s fantastic.” The two men shared a smile, and then the coupling finally dropped.

“You might be out there, somewhere,” the Doctor told him as he moved on to the last one.

“I could go meet myself,” Jack realised.

The Doctor was confident enough in Jack’s understanding of the laws of Time to not take that seriously. “Well, the only man you’re ever going to be happy with,” he ribbed.

Jack laughed. “This new regeneration—it’s kind of cheeky.”

Rose watched the professor’s reactions to the conversation with a growing sense of foreboding. She hadn’t wanted to say yes when the Doctor had asked, not when Yana could hear everything he said to Jack, but the tug of the timelines had been inexorable. Watching Professor Yana pace the lab nearly in tears, she felt like maybe there had been things he’d needed to hear that wouldn’t have come out without this conversation.

Martha shook her head. “I never understand half the things he says.” She turned around and spotted the professor, and her smile disappeared. “What’s wrong?”

“Chan, Professor, what is it, tho?”

All three women moved to stand in front of the professor, Martha and Chantho concerned, and Rose anxious.

“Time travel,” Professor Yana gasped. “They say there was time travel back in the old days.” Tears were streaking down his face. “I never believed. But what would I know? Stupid old man. Never could keep time. Always late, always lost. Even this thing never worked.”

Rose and Martha’s eyes widened as the Professor pulled an old fob watch out of his pocket. Rose felt timelines tightening around them, and she knew—that knew without a doubt—that the professor was a Time Lord.

“Time and time and time again,” Professor Yana said. “Always running out on me.”

“Can I have a look at that?” Martha asked, at the same time as Rose fought to keep from taking a step back from the professor and the watch.

“Oh, it’s only an old relic.” He chuckled wetly. “Like me.”

Martha looked at the watch, then back at the professor. “Where did you get it?”

“Hmm? I was found with it,” he said, as if he were only realising now how unusual a story that was.
Rose wanted to stop the conversation, to keep the professor from realising what he was. The Face of Boe was right; the Doctor was not alone.

“What do you mean?” Martha pressed.

“An orphan in the storm. I was a naked child found on the coast of the Silver Devastation. Abandoned, with only this.” He looked down at the watch with new eyes.

“Have you opened it?” Martha asked, before Rose could stop her.

He shrugged. “Why would I? It’s broken.”

Martha looked excited, like Christmas had come early. “How do you know it’s broken if you’ve never opened it?”

“It’s stuck,” Yana insisted, holding the watch in shaking hands. “It’s old. It’s not meant to be. I don’t know.”

Martha turned the watch over slowly and they saw the Gallifreyan symbols they’d both known would be there. She gasped and took a step back, and Rose quickly took it from her hand, wanting it dropped and out of sight.

As soon as she touched the watch, she could hear two voices, both belonging to the Time Lord inside.

_The drums, the drums, the drums, the never ending drumbeat. Open me, you human fool. Open the light and summon me and receive my majesty._

_Destroy him! And you will give your power to me!_

“Does it matter?” Professor Yana asked curiously.

Rose forced a smile. “No, it’s nothing,” she lied as she handed the watch back to the professor. “Listen, everything’s fine here. Martha and I should go see if the Doctor needs us.”

Martha followed her out of the room without question. “This could be good, couldn’t it?” she asked as they ran through the corridors. “I mean, if there’s another Time Lord, then the Doctor isn’t the only one.”

Rose sighed. “If there’s another Time Lord, then he hid himself away so he wouldn’t have to take part in the Time War. I don’t know if I can forgive that, even if the Doctor can.”

“What do you mean?”

“Martha…” Rose bit her lip. The Doctor hadn’t told her the worst part about the war, and she clearly hadn’t figured it out for herself. “The Doctor still has nightmares about the war,” she said, skirting around the truth. “He was there; he fought on the front lines. And you know how much he hates violence.”

“So here’s someone who deserted… I get it.”

That wasn’t Rose’s only misgiving. The voices she’d heard had terrified her. Whoever was inside that watch, they were nothing like her Doctor. The flashes of cruel ambition she’d seen in his eyes, that was the Time Lord in the watch bleeding through.

The TARDIS hummed mournfully and Rose nearly spun around and ran back to her. How could
she have left their ship alone with a deranged Time Lord? But the TARDIS pushed Rose forward, and she realised that if she were there when he opened the watch, he would take her, too. She had to go tell the Doctor, and together, they could track the Time Lord down.

oOoOoOoOo

“Yes!” Jack shouted when the final coupling fell into place.

“Now, get out of there,” the Doctor ordered. “Come on!”

Jack ran out of the radiation chamber and slammed the door shut while the Doctor got Atillo on the horn. “Lieutenant, everyone on board?”

“Ready and waiting,” Lieutenant Atillo replied.

“Stand by,” the Doctor told him. “Two minutes to ignition.”

“Ready to launch. Outer doors sealed.”

“Countdown commencing,” the computer announced. “T minus ninety-nine, ninety-eight…”

The Doctor and Jack ran around the control room, flicking the last switches into place for the rocket ignition. Rose and Martha ran into the room, and he beamed at them. “Ah, nearly there. The footprint, it’s a gravity pulse,” he said, excited that he finally understood it. “It stamps down, the rocket shoots up. Bit primitive. It’ll take the both of us to keep it stable.”

A gauge started beeping, and the Doctor lunged for the control panel it monitored. Martha moved to the other side of the room with him, excitement rolling off her in waves.

“Doctor, it’s the professor. He’s got this watch. He’s got a fob watch. It’s the same as yours. Same writing on it, same everything.”

“What?” The Doctor looked up at Rose. In answer, she sent him a picture of the professor holding the fob watch, and an image of the engraving on the back.

“So he’s got the same watch,” Jack said.

Rose shook her head, and the Doctor noticed she seemed… resigned. “It’s not just a watch, Jack.”

The Doctor shuddered at the feeling of timelines tightening around them. “No, no, no, it’s this, this thing, this device, it rewrites biology. Changes a Time Lord into a human.”

“And it’s the same watch,” Martha insisted.

His friend looked insistent and excited, but everything from the timelines to the dread he felt from Rose told him this was not a good thing.

“It can’t be,” the Doctor insisted, not wanting to believe what he was starting to understand was happening here.

Another gauge went haywire, and the Doctor ran down to check it out.

“That means he could be a Time Lord,” Jack exclaimed. “You might not be the last one.”

“Jack, keep it level!” he ordered, trying to ignore the conversation and focus on the far more important task of sending the last of humanity off to Utopia.
“Look, I get that maybe the bloke might not ever be your best friend,” Martha said, “but isn’t it at least a good thing that you’re not the last one left?”

The Doctor shifted down to another panel and worked the controls there. “Yes, it is. Course it is. Depends which one.”

*Do you want to hear what I heard when I held the watch?* Rose asked.

He looked at her warily, then nodded. The shared memory took only a few seconds, but that was enough time to upend his life. He knew those voices.

His hands clenched into fists and his eyes darted between Rose and Martha. “What did he say?” he ground out.

“Martha was paying more attention to him,” Rose said. “I kept getting distracted by the fixed point.”

The Doctor spun around and leaned over Martha. “What did he say?”

Martha jumped, and the Doctor felt bad for startling her. But if the Master came back…

She took a deep breath. “He looked at the watch like he could hardly see it. Like that perception filter thing.”

“What about now? Can he see it now?” the Doctor asked quietly.

“We can’t stop it, Doctor,” Rose said, and he could hear how much she hated the thought. “He’ll open the watch and come back… and he’s going to take the TARDIS.”

Jack and Martha’s shouts of protest covered up the sound of the computer counting down the final seconds.

“Take the TARDIS!?”

“Oh, it wouldn’t be the first time,” the Doctor said bitterly as he kept an eye on the last gauge. “He’s attempted it before when he was without a TARDIS. Tried to steal her from me in San Francisco, 1999.”

The countdown reached zero, and as the rocket took off, the Doctor felt the sudden awareness of another telepath on the planet. The Master had opened the watch.

The Doctor was torn; he wanted to run back to the lab and get his TARDIS and take Rose as far from here as he could, but he needed to confirm that the rocket had successfully left the atmosphere.

He got on the horn again, every second lost chafing at him. “Lieutenant, have you done it? Did you get velocity?” He waited a moment, then repeated the call. “Have you done it? Lieutenant, have you done it?”

“Affirmative. We’ll see you in Utopia.”

The Doctor didn’t even bother to say goodbye; he just dropped the phone and ran for the door. It slammed shut just as he reached it, and he pulled the sonic screwdriver out, working on the deadlock seal.

“Get it open!” he ordered Jack, who appeared at his side a moment later. “Get it open!”

In the back of his mind, he could tell Rose was accepting this much more stoically than he was. She
didn’t try to calm him down though, which he appreciated.

They got the door open and were halfway to the lab when they met the Futurekind, turning the corner ahead of them. The Doctor cursed the Master and his contingency plans as he skidded to a halt and ran in the opposite direction.

No matter how fast they ran, the Futurekind were still on their heels. The Doctor was in a panic to get to the lab, to hopefully keep the Master from taking the TARDIS.

As they ran past a service corridor, Jack slid around and turned. “This way!”

They reached the lab in less than a minute, but that door was deadlock sealed too. “Professor!” the Doctor called out, hoping to appeal to the human the Master had been. He didn’t reply, so the Doctor pounded on the door. “Professor, let me in! Let me in!” For the third time that day, he and Jack worked together to open a door. “Jack, get the door open now!”

“I know you’ve opened the watch, Professor,” the Doctor said as he ran the sonic down one side of the door. “I know you know who you are now, but there’s so much you don’t know. It isn’t like it was before.”

“They’re coming!” Martha said.

“Professor! Open the door, please! I’m begging you, Professor. Please, listen to me. Just open the door, please.”

Finally, Jack smashed the control panel and the door opened. The Doctor stumbled into the lab and saw the Master, leaning against his TARDIS. Even if he hadn’t heard the voices in the watch in Rose’s memory, he would have known who he was on sight.

His oldest friend and oldest enemy stepped back into the Doctor’s TARDIS and closed the door behind him. The Doctor’s shaking hands fumbled with the key, and the Master had turned the lock by the time he got it out.

The Doctor reached for his screwdriver next and started unlocking the door, but he’d only gotten it partway open when he heard a clunk. The TARDIS hummed apologetically, and he realised the Master had triggered the deadlock seal.

“Let me in! Let me in!” the Doctor demanded, pounding on the TARDIS. Rose had said they’d lose her, but he hadn’t wanted to believe…

He stumbled back a few steps, going over the options in his mind. The Master had the TARDIS and he couldn’t get in. The only thing he could do was make sure he knew where to find him.

The Doctor’s friends were talking to him, but he couldn’t hear them over the roaring in his ears. “I’m begging you. Everything’s changed! It’s only the two of us! We’re the only ones left! Just let me in!”

Gold light shone through the TARDIS windows, and the unearthly scream echoing from inside the console room made it clear what had happened. The Doctor took another half step back; the Master had regenerated.

“Doctor! You’d better think of something!” Jack shouted, and the Doctor was vaguely aware of the screams of the Futurekind filling the room.

But he kept his eyes on the TARDIS.
“Now then, Doctor.” The Master paused. “Ooo, new voice. Hello, hello. Hello,” he repeated, testing out his new vocal cords. “Anyway, why don’t we stop and have a nice little chat while I tell you all my plans and you can work out a way to stop me, I don’t think.”

“I’m asking you really properly,” the Doctor pleaded. “Just stop. Just think!”

“Use my name.”

“Master,” the Doctor whispered. “I’m sorry.”

“Tough!” the Master shouted, and started the dematerialisation sequence.

“I can’t hold out much longer, Doctor!” Jack shouted.

Hating fixed points more than he ever had in his life, the Doctor pulled out his sonic screwdriver and locked the coordinates of his beloved ship, apologising to her all the while for leaving her in the Master’s hands.

“Oh, no you don’t!” the Master retorted, not realising yet what he’d done. “End of the universe. Have fun. Bye, bye!”

Rose took his hand as their TARDIS disappeared, tugging gently once it was gone. “If we’re going to stop him and get her back, we need to get out of here,” she said softly. “And to do that, we need to get away from the Futurekind.”

He stared at her blankly, and she tried the words that had always gotten through to him before.

“I need you, Doctor.”

Chapter End Notes

There's a short chapter on Saturday, the last of the Master POV interludes. And then I'm afraid we are diving straight into the heart of the Master arc, with no way out but through.
On the night after winning the election in the largest landslide in living memory, most party members were celebrating with friends and family. The Master smirked as he passed quickly through a hidden underground tunnel that led directly to the old Torchwood base under the Thames Barrier. He was celebrating, just not in the same insipid ways humans celebrated.

His smirk broadened into a triumphant grin when he entered the office-turned-cell and saw the person he had come to see. “Hello, Miss Jones,” he said.

Tish raised her head up from her pillow. “I hope you don’t expect me to call you Prime Minister now.”

The Master chuckled. “I have no need of that title, though it will serve my plans nicely. Soon, humans will be calling me by my true name.”

“Oh, and what’s that?”

“They call me the Master.”

Tish snorted. “I don’t know where you come from, Saxon, but you’re pretty full of yourself if you think people are going to call you the Master.”

All of the Master’s lighthearted humour evaporated. He grabbed the bars and leaned against her cell. “Oh, you will learn—you will all learn exactly why that’s my name.”

But Tish didn’t cower away from him like he expected. Instead, she stared up at him, challenge sparking in her dark eyes. “They’re going to stop you.”

“Oh? Who exactly would they be?” As quickly as it had disappeared, his amusement returned.

“Martha, Rose, and the Doctor. They’ll find out what’s going on here, and they’ll come back and take care of you.”

The Master chuckled. “Oh, Letitia Jones, if only you knew. The Doctor already knows that I’m here. Unless I miss my guess, he and his merry band of followers—including your sister—will be here tomorrow.”

Tish nodded. “Good. Then things can go back to normal.”

“Would you like to hear what will happen when the Doctor arrives in London tomorrow?” The Master leaned against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest.

She slowly sat up and looked at him. “Why do I get the feeling that I won’t like whatever you’re about to say?”

“Because you’re a smart girl, for a human.” The Master paced in front of her cell. “When I stole the Doctor’s TARDIS from him, he managed to lock the coordinates so I couldn’t do anything but give it a slight bump—18 months farther back in the past than the place he had been most recently.”

Lingering anger seeped out at the memory of that revelation. “I admit, I was furious when I realised that. The whole point of having a time machine is to have the ability to go wherever and whenever you want.” He pulled his face into an exaggerated pout, then stretched his mouth into a wide grin.
and bounced on the balls of his feet. “But then I saw that I had been given a gift—I knew precisely when the Doctor would show up, more or less, and I had a year and a half to lay a trap.”

Trepidation crossed finally Tish’s face. “What do you mean, a trap?”

“The Doctor’s most recent landing had been in Britain on Election Day. He fused the coordinates of his TARDIS so he would know where to find me… which means, by extension, that I know where to find him.” He tugged on his ear. “I did expect him today, actually, but his landings have always been a bit haphazard. Tomorrow though, surely…

“Yeah, but you can’t do anything about that. You’ve got no way of knowing when they actually get here, and there’s the whole planet for them to hide on.”

The Master smiled. “Except, my dear Miss Jones, I will know exactly when the Doctor and Rose Tyler arrive on Earth, thanks to a handy bit of biology. And of course he’ll come here—he’s rather fixated on your dreary little island.”

As a human, he’d seen the Vortex manipulator on Jack Harkness’ wrist, so he knew the Doctor would be able to use that to bring them back to Great Britain. And when they returned, he would be ready for them. The TARDIS, newly converted into a paradox machine, had been transported onto the Valiant a week ago.

He faked a yawn. “Oh dear, I’m feeling a bit tired. I should probably get some rest. After all, tomorrow is a busy day—meeting with the Queen and all that.” He waved at Tish and left her alone in her cell.

Tomorrow, he would introduce the Toclafane to the human race, and in just thirty-six hours, the paradox machine would activate. Oh, if only the Doctor and Rose were on the Valiant when it began.

The Master tapped his fingers against his thigh in the same four-beat rhythm he still heard in his head. The Earth would soon cower at the sound of drums.
Rose’s words broke the Doctor out of the fog he’d been in since the Master had locked him out of his TARDIS. He dashed to the door and grabbed Jack’s wrist with the Vortex manipulator.

Jack’s arm jerked every time the Futurekind pounded on the door at his back, making it hard to point the sonic screwdriver at the inner workings of the Vortex manipulator. “Hold still! Don’t move! Hold it still!” the Doctor ordered. Finally, he was able to repair the connections that had burnt out when Jack left the Game Station.

“I’m telling you, it’s broken,” Jack protested. “It hasn’t worked for years.”

The Doctor looked up at him and shook his head. “That’s because you didn’t have me. Rose, Martha, grab hold.” As soon as he was sure everyone had a hand on the device, he pressed the button. “Now!”

Calling the Vortex manipulator a space hopper hadn’t been jealousy talking. The device offered minimal protection from the Vortex—enough that the trip didn’t kill them—but it still felt a little like being put through a blender.

When they were pushed out of the Vortex, they all stumbled into an alleyway in London. The Doctor hunched over, trying to regain his equilibrium.

“Oh, my head,” Martha gasped out.

“Time travel without a capsule. That’s a killer,” the Doctor said as he straightened up. He looked around for Rose and found her leaning against the wall, her face pale.

“All right there, love?” he murmured as he rubbed her back.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’ll be fine.” She smiled weakly and took his hand.

The Doctor opened his mouth, then shook his head and pressed his lips into a thin line. They’d find out soon enough if the TARDIS was far enough away to affect her health; no reason to borrow trouble.

She should be nearby; even without the “Vote Saxon” posters plastered to the building, he would have known they were in 2008. And as long as the TARDIS was here, Rose would be fine. Unease bubbled up inside him, and he turned on his heel, anxious to get out of the alley and away from the sense of foreboding.

“Come on,” he said, leading them out into the street. He still needed to find the Master.

“Still, at least we made it,” Jack said as they walked through London. “Earth, twenty-first century by the looks of it. Talk about lucky.”

“That wasn’t luck; that was me,” the Doctor countered. He looked around. “Though something pulled us slightly off course; we should have ended up in Cardiff, not London.”

“Let’s sit down while we come up with a plan,” Rose suggested, pointing to cafe tables and chairs.

“The moral is,” Jack said once they were seated, “if you’re going to get stuck at the end of the universe, get stuck with an ex-Time Agent and his Vortex manipulator.” He tapped proudly at his
wrist band, but the Doctor couldn’t be bothered to argue yet again that he’d been the one to get them here.

Martha shook her head. “But this Master bloke, he’s got the TARDIS. He could be anywhere in time and space.”

The Doctor scanned the street. Harold Saxon was everywhere—on posters, on t-shirts—and the Master was nowhere. He knew the Master was here, but he still couldn’t feel him in his mind.

*How is that possible?*

“No, he’s here,” he told Martha. “Trust me.”

“Who is he, anyway?” Martha asked. “And that voice at the end, that wasn’t the Professor.”

“Chancho was holding a gun,” Rose said. “If she shot him, he must have regenerated.”

Martha frowned. “What does that mean?”

The Doctor was vaguely aware that Rose’s gaze cut over to him before she answered Martha’s question. “When a Time Lord is dying, their body regenerates into a new form. New face, voice, body—everything.”

“Then how are we going to find him?” Martha asked worriedly.

Across the street, a beggar tapped a rhythm out against his cup. Four even beats, repeated over and over. There was something about it…

The Doctor shook himself out of his daze. “I’ll know him, the moment I see him. Time Lords always do.”

Martha straightened up and looked at something behind the Doctor. “But hold on. If he could be anyone… We missed the election.”

The Doctor took in the ubiquitous presence of “Vote Saxon” posters on the street with new eyes. A large public television screen flickered on, and they all stood up to watch.

“But it can’t be,” Martha breathed.

“Mr. Saxon has returned from the Palace,” the news anchor announced, “and is greeting the crowd inside Saxon Headquarters.”

A slim man was walking confidently down a flight of stairs. As soon as the Doctor saw him, a jolt of recognition hit him. Beside him, he heard Rose quickly suck in a breath. *I can feel him now, in my head,* she told him. *But I couldn’t before. It’s like, he was hidden, until I saw him.*

“I said I knew that voice,” Martha said as they joined the crowd that was gathering around the screen. “When he spoke inside the TARDIS. I’ve heard that voice hundreds of times. I’ve seen him. We all have. That was the voice of Harold Saxon.”

The Doctor nodded. “That’s him.” The Master looked directly at the camera, a feline smile on his face. “He’s Prime Minister. The Master is Prime Minister of Great Britain.”

On screen, a photographer was coaxing the Master into poses. “Mr. Saxon, this way, sir. Come on, kiss for the lady, sir.”
The Doctor raised an eyebrow when the Master bent down to kiss the pretty woman on his arm. “The Master and his wife?”

The Master stepped away from his wife and addressed the reporters gathered at the foot of the steps. “This country has been sick. This country needs healing. This country needs medicine. In fact, I’d go so far as to say that what this country really needs right now, is a Doctor.”

Rose grabbed the Doctor’s hand. “He knows we’re here.”

The Doctor nodded. “He would have known the moment we got here.”

Martha got up and hailed a cab. “Come on. Let’s get out of the street.”

During the silent cab ride, Rose tried to reach out for the TARDIS. If they could find the ship, they’d stand a better chance against the Master.

The answering hum wasn’t reassuring. The TARDIS was there on Earth, but she felt off somehow. Rose bit her lip. She’d tried not to think about it, but she couldn’t ignore the possibility that the Master had messed with the TARDIS enough to affect her own health.

*Don’t worry about that yet,* the Doctor told her, rubbing his thumb in soothing circles over the back of her hand. *If he has, we’ll deal with it. But you feel fine right now, don’t you?*

She nodded.

*And hopefully, we’ll have her back soon and this will all be behind us.*

A shiver of foreboding went through Rose. The Doctor didn’t believe this would be resolved that quickly any more than she did, but for their own peace of mind, they shoved those bleak thoughts to the back of their minds and sat in silence for the rest of the ride to Martha’s.

Martha led the way up the stairs to her flat. “Home,” she said as she pushed through the door.

Rose stood to the side of the room while everyone else bustled into action. The Doctor threw his coat down onto the sofa and Jack pulled out his mobile. Martha was poised to do whatever the Doctor asked.

“What have you got?” he demanded. “Computer, laptop, anything.” He put on his glasses and noticed Jack on the phone. “Jack, who are you phoning? You can’t tell anyone we’re here.”

Jack frowned. “Just some friends of mine, but there’s no reply.”

Martha handed the Doctor the laptop she’d retrieved from underneath the television. “Here you go. Any good?”

Jack grabbed it out of the Doctor’s hands and carried it over to the kitchen table. “I can show you the Saxon websites. He’s been around for ages.” Rose and the Doctor huddled behind him, waiting impatiently for the website to load.

“That’s so weird though,” Martha said. Rose glanced over her shoulder and watched her turn around in her living room, looking stunned. “It’s the day after the election. That’s only four days after I met you.”

The Doctor straightened up and shoved a hand through his hair. “We went flying all around the universe while he was here all the time.”
“You going to tell us who he is?” Martha asked.

Rose frowned at the impatient tone in her voice. “He’s a Time Lord,” she said, trying to hint that she shouldn’t ask for more.

But Martha had never been good at picking up on that particular hint. “What about the rest of it? I mean, who’d call himself ‘the Master?’” she said, putting air quotes around the name.

“It doesn’t matter,” the Doctor said, then bent over the laptop again in an obvious dismissal. “Come on, show me Harold Saxon.”

Rose recognised the irritation on Martha’s face, but for once, she didn’t scold her bond mate on his rudeness. Later, he might need to tell more of the story, but right now, he was still reeling from the events of the last two hours, and it was more important that they figure out how the Master had become Prime Minister in the first place.

“Do you mind, Doc?” Jack said finally, looking over his shoulder at the Doctor. “I can literally feel you breathing down my neck.”

The Doctor bared his teeth, but he retreated a few paces and perched on the back of Martha’s sofa, his gaze still focused on the computer.

The Vote Saxon website finally loaded, and Jack clicked on the testimonials tab. Endorsement videos played in a pane that took up most of the page. “I’m voting Saxon,” Sharon Osbourne said. “He can tick my box any day.”

The band McFly were next: “Vote Saxon! Go Harry!”

And finally, Tory MP Ann Widdecombe was interviewed standing with the Master, with Big Ben in the background. “I think Mr. Saxon is exactly what this country needs. He’s a very fine man.” She looked up at Saxon. “And he’s handsome too.”

Rose snorted. “Figures the Master would be a Tory.” It made her skin crawl to see how thoroughly he’d hoodwinked the nation, and she was glad when Jack moved on to the page with Saxon’s biography.

“Former Minister of Defence,” Jack told them. “First came to prominence when he shot down the Racnoss on Christmas Eve. Nice work, by the way,” he added, looking at them over his shoulder.

“Oh, thanks,” the Doctor said absently.

Martha walked over to Jack. “But he goes back years.” She tapped at the personal history tab and scrolled through the pictures as she talked. “He’s famous. Everyone knows his story. Look. Cambridge University, Rugby blue. Won the Athletics thing. Wrote a novel, went into business, marriage, everything. He’s got a whole life.”

The Doctor leaned back on his perch and rubbed his hand over his mouth. Rose could understand his confusion; how was this even possible? She’d seen him use the sonic screwdriver to lock the coordinates on the TARDIS—the Master simply couldn’t have been here long enough to build the kind of history he seemed to have.

“Budge over, Jack,” the Doctor ordered as he jumped off the sofa. “Why don’t you make tea? Four sugars and a splash of milk for me.”

“Lemon and honey for me,” Martha added.
Jack rolled his eyes, but then he shrugged and smiled at Rose. “Milk and one sugar, right?”

Rose blinked; he still remembered that after 150 years? She nodded, and Jack went into the kitchen. A moment later, she heard water running.

The Doctor slid into the chair and started poking around on the Master’s website. He swung his legs up onto Martha’s desk, but Rose tapped his knee and shook her head when he looked at her. He pouted, but put his feet back down on the floor and hunched over the laptop instead.

“There’s something not right about this,” the Doctor muttered as he dug deeper into Saxon’s past. “Harold Saxon has this history, but there’s no way he’s been here that long.” Rose ran her fingers through his hair, and she felt him relax just a little. “But if it’s all an elaborate lie, then how did he convince the entire nation?”

“But he’s got the TARDIS,” Jack reminded him from the kitchen. “Maybe the Master went back in time and has been living here for decades.”

The Doctor didn’t look up from the computer. “No.”

“Why not? Worked for me.” Jack returned with three cups precariously balanced in his hands.

The Doctor twisted in the chair and took his tea. “When he was stealing the TARDIS, the only thing I could do was fuse the coordinates. I locked them permanently. He can only travel between the year one hundred trillion and the last place the TARDIS landed. Which is right here, right now.”

“Yeah, but a little leeway?” Jack asked sceptically.

The Doctor leaned back a little, thinking about it. He wanted to deny the possibility, but the Master was a genius—it was possible he could have given himself a slight bump. “Well, eighteen months? Tops—the most he could have been here is eighteen months.”

A thought occurred to Rose. He’s the one who was trying to split us up at Canary Wharf.

_Most likely. I did think at the time that only a Time Lord would be able to manipulate timelines the way he was doing._

He looked back at the laptop. “So how has he managed all this? The Master was always sort of hypnotic,” he admitted, “but this is on a massive scale.”

“I was going to vote for him,” Martha said matter-of-factly.

“Really?” Rose asked, and the Doctor knew she was thinking the same thing he was—Martha was clever and savvy. How had she been sucked in?

“Well, it was before I even met you. And I liked him.”

“Me too.”

The Doctor looked from Martha to Jack. “Why do you say that?” Momentary confusion crossed Jack’s face, and the Doctor pressed for more details. “What was his policy? What did he stand for?”

“I don’t know. He always sounded good.” Martha started tapping her fingers in the same four beat rhythm the Doctor had heard on the street. “Like you could trust him. Just nice. He spoke about…”

She paused, and the slightly vacant look on her face as she tried to pull up details of the Master’s campaign was disturbing.
“I can’t really remember, but it was good. Just the sound of his voice.”

The constant tapping was both annoying and ominous somehow. “What’s that?” the Doctor asked sharply.

Martha jolted out of her daze. “What?”

The Doctor pointed at her hands. “That. That tapping, that rhythm. What are you doing?”

Martha looked down at her hands, and the Doctor realised she hadn’t even been aware of what she was doing. “I don’t know. It’s nothing. It’s just, I don’t know.”

A music alert played from the Saxon website, and when the Doctor looked, a banner covered the page, announcing, “Saxon Broadcast All Channels.”

The Doctor ran across the room and turned the telly on. “Our lord and master is speaking to his kingdom.”

The Master was sitting in the cabinet room, his hands folded casually in front of himself. “Britain, Britain, Britain. What extraordinary times we’ve had. Just a few years ago, this world was so small. And then they came, out of the unknown, falling from the skies. You’ve seen it happen.”

He narrated a few clips of the Doctor and Rose’s adventures in London. “Big Ben destroyed. A spaceship over London. All those ghosts and metal men. The Christmas star that came to kill.”

The camera focused on the Master again. “Time and time again, and the government told you nothing. Well, not me. Not Harold Saxon. Because my purpose here today is to tell you this. Citizens of Great Britain…” He paused, letting anticipation build. “I have been contacted. A message for humanity, from beyond the stars.”

The Doctor’s mind raced, trying to figure out what the Master was up to. He couldn’t possibly be orchestrating humanity’s official first contact almost fifty years early, but there was also no way he was simply trying to be open with his constituency.

The Master nodded to someone off camera, and a staticky video started. A metal sphere hovered in mid-air and spoke in a childlike voice. “People of the Earth, we come in peace. We bring great gifts. We bring technology and wisdom and protection. And all we ask in return is your friendship.”

“Ooo, sweet,” the Master cooed into the camera. “And this species has identified itself. They are called the Toclafane.”

The Doctor rocked back on his heels. “What?” If he’d needed proof that the Master was up to something, that was it.

“And tomorrow morning, they will appear,” the Master continued. “Not in secret, but to all of you. Diplomatic relations with a new species will begin. Tomorrow, we take our place in the universe. Every man, woman, and child. Every teacher and chemist and lorry driver and farmer.” He shrugged and smirked. “Oh, I don’t know, every medical student?”

The Doctor spun around to look at Martha, whose eyes were wide and frightened. His mind raced, and he turned the TV around to see sticks of dynamite rigged to explode.

“Out!” he hollered. Rose and their friends ran out of the flat, and the Doctor followed them, after grabbing the laptop and his coat.
Martha was halfway across the street when she heard the explosion and shattering glass. She screamed and spun around, unprepared for the sight of flames licking through her kitchen window. And if they know who I am…

“Everyone all right?” the Doctor asked, a protective arm already around Rose.

“Fine, yeah, fine,” Jack said.

“Martha?”

Martha ignored him, dialling her mum. The Doctor had taken care of his family; she was going to take care of hers.

“What are you doing?” the Doctor asked.

“He knows about me,” she said, pacing the street while the phone rang. “What about my family?”

“Don’t tell them anything.”

Martha’s simmering anger spilled over at the order, and she glared at him. “I’ll do what I like,” she said through clenched teeth.

Someone on the other end of the line finally picked up. “Hello?”

“Mum?” The air whooshed out of Martha’s lungs in an audible breath. “Oh my God, you’re there.”

“Of course I’m here, sweetheart. You all right?”

“I’m fine. I’m fine,” Martha lied. “Mum, has there been anyone asking about me?”

The hesitation wouldn’t have been noticeable to anyone who didn’t know Francine, but it was enough to make the hair on the back of Martha’s neck stand on end.

“Martha, I think perhaps you should come round.”

Martha looked back at the Doctor, Rose, and Jack. “I can’t. Not now.”

“No, but it’s your father. We’ve been talking and we thought we might give it another go.”

Martha blinked. There was no way that was true. “Don’t be so daft. Since when?”

“Just come around. Come to the house. We can celebrate.”

Dread pooled in the pit of Martha’s stomach. “You’d never get back with him in a million years.”

“Ask him yourself.”

Martha turned in a circle and clutched the phone nervously, not understanding what was going on. Less than a week ago, her parents had been yelling at each other outside of a restaurant, and now they claimed they were planning to reconcile. It wasn’t right.

“Martha, it’s me,” her father said.

“Dad, what are you doing there?” Martha spun around to look at the Doctor, who walked towards her slowly.

“Like your mother said. Come round. We can explain everything.”
Martha’s mum could bluff her way through anything, but her father was a horrible liar. “Dad?” Martha asked. “Just say yes or no. Is there someone else there?”

There was a long pause, then he shouted, “Yes! Just run!” In the background, Martha could hear her mum say something about Tish, but her father shouted back. “I’m not sacrificing one daughter to save the other! Run, Martha!”

There was a loud clattering noise, like the phone had hit the ground, and then sounds of a fight and her mother yelling over the top of it all.

“Dad? What’s going on? Dad?” Martha flipped her phone shut and jogged to her car. “We’ve got to help them.”

“That’s exactly what they want. It’s a trap!” the Doctor exclaimed.

“I don’t care.” Martha got in and shoved the key into the ignition.

Rose slid into the front seat beside her, and the men got in the back. Martha started the car before the doors were all shut and floored it, sending them roaring down the street. She drove heedless of all other traffic, swerving through lanes and into oncoming traffic as needed in order to keep moving.

“Corner!” the Doctor yelled, and she cranked the wheel hard, sending them skidding around a corner.

Once they were heading in the right direction, Martha tossed her phone to Rose. “Speed dial 2,” she ordered, and her friend pressed the button that would call Tish and handed it back to her.

The phone rang four times, and Martha clutched the steering wheel tighter. “Come on, Tish. Pick up.”

“You have reached Letitia Jones.”

Martha swore when the call went straight to voice mail, thinking about what her parents had said about Tish.

“He must have taken her.” She tossed the phone onto the centre console and glared back at the Doctor. “It’s your fault. It’s all your fault!”

“Martha, listen to me,” Rose said quietly. “I know you want to help your family, but in order to do that, you have to stay alive. They want us to go to your mum’s, because then we’re neutralised.”

The car squealed around the corner, but Martha slammed on the brakes when she saw her parents being shoved into a police van. “Right,” she muttered, shifting the car into reverse and hitting the gas. “Let’s get out of here.”

She shifted back into drive and peeled out seconds before gunfire filled the air. Out of the line of fire, she threw a scathing look back at the Doctor. “The only place he can go, planet Earth. Great!”

“Careful!” he ordered when she nearly ran into a cyclist.

Jack leaned forward. “Martha, listen to me. Do as I say. We’ve got to ditch this car. Pull over. Right now!”

She wanted to argue, but she’d seen enough movies where people were on the run to know he was right. “There’s an underpass down here,” she said, turning the car down another street. “We can
leave it there. Maybe they won’t find it and they’ll think we’re still in it.”

“Good thinking, Martha,” Rose said.

Martha clenched her jaw. She didn’t want anyone to tell her she was clever, or smart. She just wanted to know her family were safe.

It started raining as she carefully navigated the underpass to park the car, hidden, on the other side. Everyone else piled out quickly, but Martha scanned the car, looking for anything she’d want. Not seeing anything, she closed the door and dialled her brother.

“Martha, come on!” the Doctor ordered from fifteen feet in front of her.

Martha jogged to catch up with them and nearly cried when Leo picked up the phone. “Leo! Oh, thank God. Leo, you got to listen to me. Where are you?”

“I’m in Brighton,” Leo said. Martha drew in a relieved breath—that was why Saxon hadn’t gotten them. “Yeah, we came down with Boxer. Did you see that Saxon thing on telly?”

“Leo, just listen to me,” Martha interrupted. “Don’t go home. I’m telling you. Don’t phone Mum or Dad or Tish. You’ve got to hide.”

“Shut up,” Leo said after a short pause.


A third voice broke into the conversation. “Ooo, a nice little game of hide and seek. I love that. But I’ll find you, Martha Jones,” Saxon promised. “Been a long time since we saw each other. Must be, what, one hundred trillion years?”

Martha stood stock still. “Let them go, Saxon. Do you hear me! Let them go!”

The Doctor had been trying to give Martha space, but when he realised the Master had intercepted her phone call, he shoved the laptop at Jack and plucked the phone from her hand. He walked a few steps away from his friends, with only Rose at his side.

“I’m here,” he told the Master quietly.

After a long pause, the other man whispered his name. “Doctor.”

“Master.”

The Master sighed. “I like it when you use my name.”

The Doctor looked around at the empty shopping centre he was standing in. “You chose it. Psychiatrist’s field day.”

“As you chose yours. The man who makes people better. How sanctimonious is that?”

The Doctor held his hand out and Rose took it immediately. “So, Prime Minister, then,” he said, walking slowly away from the underpass. Jack and Martha followed, but maintained the distance between them.

“I know. It’s good, isn’t it?”

“Who are those creatures?” the Doctor asked, voicing the question he’d had ever since the Master
had claimed they were the Toclafane. “Because there’s no such thing as the Toclafane. It’s just a made up name, like the Bogeyman.”

“Do you remember all those fairy tales about the Toclafane when we were kids back home?” the Master asked smoothly. “Where is it, Doctor?”

That was the question he’d been dreading ever since Rose had told him about the watch. How could he possibly explain to someone who hadn’t been there that he had been forced to make an impossible choice—Gallifrey, or the universe.

He swallowed hard. “Gone.”

“How can Gallifrey be gone?” the Master spat out.

The Doctor stopped and looked at the ground, swallowing back the tears that threatened. “It burnt.” Rose’s compassion warmed him, and he squeezed her hand in thanks.

“And the Time Lords?”

“Dead.” The Doctor sat down on a bench. “And the Daleks, more or less. What happened to you?”

“The Time Lords only resurrected me because they knew I’d be the perfect warrior for a Time War.” The answer sickened the Doctor, but he knew how far the High Council had gone towards the end of the war. “I was there when the Dalek Emperor took control of the Cruciform. I saw it. I ran. I ran so far. Made myself human so they would never find me, because I was so scared.”

The Doctor sighed and squeezed Rose’s hand. He understood that, better than anyone. “I know.” The Time War had been terrifying, and he couldn’t blame the Master for hiding, not really.

“All of them?” the Master asked suddenly, turning the conversation away from himself. “But not you, which must mean…”

The Doctor had known it wouldn’t take him long to figure that out. “I was the only one who could end it. And I tried. I did. I tried everything.”

“What did it feel like, though? Two almighty civilisations burning. Oh, tell me, how did that feel?” the Master whispered reverently.

“Stop it!” the Doctor ordered, hating the way his old friend was twisting the worst day of his life into an experience to be envied.

“You must have been like God.”

“I’ve been alone ever since,” the Doctor said, focusing on what the end of the War had truly meant for him. “But not anymore. Don’t you see? All we’ve got is each other.”

The Master chuckled. “Oh, but you’ve got your bond mate, your little human-Time Lord hybrid.”

The Doctor’s hand clenched around the phone. He wanted to yell into the phone, to demand the Master leave Rose alone, but he took a few deep breaths and changed the subject instead.

“You could stop this right now. We could leave this planet. We can fight across the constellations, if that’s what you want, but not on Earth.”

“Too late,” the Master told him quietly.
There was something about the way he said that… “Why do you say that?”

“The drumming.”

The Doctor finally placed that four-beat rhythm he kept hearing—it was the drums Professor Yana had said he heard in his mind. Somehow, the Master had taken that telepathic misfire and passed it on to the whole of the human race.

“Can’t you hear it?” the Master continued. “I thought it would stop, but it never does. Never ever stops. Inside my head, the drumming, Doctor. The constant drumming.”

“I could help you. Please, let me help.”

“It’s everywhere. Listen, listen, listen. Here come the drums. Here come the drums.”

Someone across the street started tapping the same rhythm out against his legs. The Doctor stood up abruptly and started pacing. “What have you done? Tell me how you’ve done this. What are those creatures? Tell me!”

“Ooo look. You’re on TV.”

“Stop it,” the Doctor said, tired of the Master’s flippancy. “Answer me.”

“No, really. You’re on telly. You and your little band, which, by the way, is ticking every demographic box. So, congratulations on that. Look, there you are.”

The Doctor looked through the shopping centre window at the television on display. All their faces flashed across the screen, and the banner read, “Nationwide hunt for terrorist suspects.”

“You’re public enemies number one, two, three and four,” the Master said smugly. “Oh, and you can tell handsome Jack that I’ve sent his little gang off on a wild goose chase to the Himalayas, so he won’t be getting any help from them.” The Doctor looked over at Jack and Martha and nodded for them to come take a look. “Now, go on, off you go. Why not start by turning to the right?”

The Doctor looked up and spotted the CCTV camera. “He can see us,” he said, then disabled the camera with the sonic.


The Doctor ended the call and realised the severity of the situation. The Master was the Prime Minister. “He’s got control of everything.” Every CCTV camera, every weapon, every branch of law enforcement…

Martha stared at him, her arms crossed over her chest. “What do we do?”

Rose’s face was white. “If he’s Prime Minister, then…”

Jack finished the thought for her. “We’ve got nowhere to go.”

“Doctor, what do we do?” Martha repeated.

He looked at the three of them and took Rose’s hand. “We run.”
Chapter 40: On the Run

Jack led them to a warehouse where they could hide. “It’s one of my safehouses.” He turned on a camp lantern and set it down on a rickety table along with the laptop. “Well, more safe than house, but that’s what counts, right?”

The Doctor used the sonic screwdriver to start a fire in a short metal barrel, then draped his wet coat over some crates to dry. It had started raining shortly after he’d hung up on the Master, and they were all damp and cold.

He held his hands over the flames for a moment, then stuck them in his pockets. “So that’s shelter taken care of. What about food?”

“I can go pick something up,” Martha offered. “I saw a chippy down the street.”

The Doctor nodded, and Martha walked back into the shadows. Rose wrapped her arms around his waist, and Jack showed more tact than the Doctor would have given him credit for by turning his attention to the laptop.

We’re gonna be fine, Doctor.

He buried his face in her hair. I wish we could know that for certain, Rose. I wish… He paused, then let the wish come out. I wish you weren’t here.

He felt a flash of hurt, followed almost immediately by understanding. Is it going to be that bad, then?

The Doctor looked around and found a chair. He pulled it over, then sat down and tugged Rose into his lap.

The Master is unpredictable, he explained. I still don’t know what he’s really up to, which means I don’t know how to stop him. And he knows…

He had to take a deep breath to control his fear, and Rose caught his meaning before he finished the thought.

He knows we’re bonded.

Yes.

Rose kissed his temple. You’re afraid he’ll use me for leverage.

I know he will, if given the chance.

She ran her hand through his hair and massaged his neck gently. We’ll get through this the same way we always do, Doctor—together.

The Doctor pressed his lips to Rose’s jaw. She arched her neck in obvious invitation, and he trailed kisses down her neck until he reached the hollow of her throat. He sucked there long enough to pull a sigh from her, then he moved up to kiss her lips.

It wasn’t easy to get a good angle with her sitting in his lap, so he threaded his fingers through her
hair and turned her head just a bit. Her mouth opened automatically beneath his, but despite the invitation, the Doctor kept the kiss delicate, sipping at her lips and stroking his tongue lightly against hers. One hand settled on her hip, and he ran the other up and down her back, enjoying the way she shivered in his arms.

A glimmer of intent flashed over their bond, and then Rose’s tongue swept into his mouth, aiming for its roof. The Doctor nipped at her bottom lip and fought for control for a moment, but when she sucked his tongue into her mouth, he ceded the field.

Rose rubbed her thumb over the sensitive spot on his jaw, and the Doctor sighed into her mouth. I love kissing you, she told him. You always taste so good.

The Doctor smiled and pulled back from the kiss, enjoying her soft whine of protest. The sound changed to whimper when he dropped his lips back to her neck, working his way down to her shoulder with soft kisses and gentle nibbles. He tugged the collar of her shirt out of his way with his teeth and then sucked hard on her clavicle.

Rose scraped her nails against his scalp, and the Doctor pressed his lips to her collarbone to muffle his groan. When she did it again, his hands clutched at her back, trying to pull her closer.

Jack’s voice pulled them out of their private moment. “As gorgeous as this is—and it is, you two have no idea how sexy you are—you should probably stop before you give my fantasies any more material.”

Rose hid her red cheeks against the Doctor’s chest, and he glared at the captain over the top of her head. “Jack.”

Jack grinned, unrepentant. “Hey, I’m not the one who spent the last ten minutes snogging my wife, completely ignoring the fact that there was someone else in the room.” He looked pointedly at his watch. “Besides, Martha should be back any minute, and I’d be willing to bet that she wants to see you two going at it about as much as you want me to see it.”

The Doctor grumbled, but he knew Jack was right. Rose tried to slide off his lap, but he held her tight. Doctor…

Just... give me a minute, love. He felt her understanding, and then wicked amusement. A moment later, she gently stroked the bond, finding his arousal and caressing it. Not. Helping, he told her, barely holding back an audible groan.

Rose pulled back from her telepathic touch, and the tension eased out of the Doctor’s body. When he adjusted his hold on her and tugged her shirt back into place, she sighed and rested her head in the crook of his neck. For a few minutes, she’d almost forgotten about the Master and the lost TARDIS, and she hadn’t wanted to let go of the little bit of peace she’d found. But Jack was right—this was neither the time nor the place.

The TARDIS’ silence worried her more than anything. The first month in 1969 was still fresh in her mind, and she had no desire to repeat the experience—especially not when it seemed almost guaranteed that they would need to run.

She took a deep breath and reached for the ship again. A moment later, she felt a buzz in the back of her mind, like someone was trying to contact her telepathically but was too weak to make the connection. The telepathic signature was familiar though, and she stretched as far as she could to meet her halfway.
A song hummed quietly in her head, and Rose relaxed. The TARDIS was here, close enough to communicate and hopefully close enough to keep her from getting sick. She did notice that the time ship felt wrong… weak, somehow, and she gritted her teeth at the idea that the Master had done something to her.

There was no chiming conversation like there usually was when she communicated with the TARDIS. Instead, the ship simply flashed a mauve warning at her before fading into an almost imperceptible presence in the back of her mind.

Footsteps echoed in the alley, and they all tensed until they could see Martha’s silhouette. Rose’s stomach growled when she smelled the chips, and she stood up and took one of the bags.

“How was it?” Jack asked.

Martha shrugged; she’d tried to be careful on the way there and back, but at the same time not look suspicious. “I don’t think anyone saw me.” She looked up at Jack. “Anything new?”

Jack tapped at his wrist device. “I’ve got this tuned to government wavelengths so we can follow what Saxon’s doing.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I meant about my family.”

Rose and Jack pulled chairs up around the rickety table the laptop was sitting on. The Doctor was already there, looking at something on the computer.

“It still says, ‘the Jones family taken in for questioning.’” The Doctor looked at her over the rim of his glasses. “Tell you what, though. No mention of Leo.”

Martha handed Jack his dinner, then unwrapped hers. “He’s not as daft as he looks,” she said with a smile, then straightened up when she realised what she was saying. “I’m talking about my brother on the run. How did this happen?”

“Oh, these chips are gorgeous,” Rose moaned, blushing a little when Jack waggled his eyebrows at her.

“Actually, they’re not bad,” the Doctor agreed, his bland tone of voice at odds with the flirtatious look in his eyes.

Martha clenched her fists and stared at the table while she struggled with her resentment. She usually found their banter amusing and sweet, but right now watching the two of them together just reminded her that they still had each other while most of her family were in the Master’s custody.

*And who the hell is the Master, anyway? A Time Lord, yeah—but that doesn’t really explain the Doctor’s reaction to him.* Martha turned her gaze to Rose, hoping her friend would catch the hint and ask the Doctor for more information.

They ate in silence for a moment, and then Rose realised that both Martha and Jack were looking at her expectantly. She swallowed hard when she realised what they wanted. On most days, she it was her job to soothe the Doctor’s bad dreams and memories of Gallifrey, and her first instinct was to tell them to back off, like she had in Martha’s flat. But the time she’d anticipated had come. They all needed some answers.

Rose took a breath and rested her hand on the Doctor’s elbow. “Doctor… can you tell us about the Master?”
He stopped chewing and looked at her. Rose met his wary gaze evenly. Doctor, they’re on the run with you. And they don’t regret it, because they love you and they trust you, but they deserve to know something.

“Yeah, what is he to you?” Martha asked. “Like a colleague or…?”

The Doctor leaned back in his chair and popped a chip into his mouth. “A friend, at first.”

Surprise flashed across Martha’s face, and she looked over at Jack. “I thought you were going to say he was your secret brother or something.”

All three of them looked at her, then the Doctor said, “You’ve been watching too many soap operas with Rose.”

Jack looked at the Doctor, a furrow in his brow. “But all the legends of Gallifrey made it sound so perfect.”

The Doctor reached for Rose’s hand and laced their fingers together. “Well, perfect to look at, maybe.” He leaned back in his chair and rested their joined hands on his thigh. “And it was. It was beautiful. They used to call it the Shining World of the Seven Systems.”

Familiar images flashed through Rose’s mind, pictures of red grass under a burnt orange sky. The Doctor’s hand clenched around hers, and she realised he was sharing his memories with her as he spoke.

They gazed together across the valley, and as they turned, a city came into view, encased in a glass dome. Rose pressed her tongue against the back of her teeth. It looked beautiful, but there was something cold in the way that it was held apart from the rest of the planet.

“And on the Continent of Wild Endeavour, in the Mountains of Solace and Solitude, there stood the Citadel of the Time Lords, the oldest and most mighty race in the universe, looking down on the galaxies below. Sworn never to interfere, only to watch.”

His voice lost the nostalgic quality, and Rose knew he was trying to distance himself from the next part of the story. “Children of Gallifrey were taken from their families at the age of eight to enter the Academy. And some say that’s when it all began. When he was a child. That’s when the Master saw eternity.”

The Doctor’s memory shifted to an image of a portal at night, surrounded by torches. There was something familiar about it to Rose, like it tickled a memory just out of reach.

“As a novice, he was taken for initiation. He stood in front of the Untempered Schism. It’s a gap in the fabric of reality, through which could be seen the whole of the Vortex.”

Rose started, and the Doctor rubbed his thumb over hers. That’s why it had looked familiar.

“You stand there, eight years old, staring at the raw power of time and space. Just a child. Some would be inspired, some would run away, and some would go mad.”

He pushed the memories away and shoved another chip into his mouth. “Brr. I don’t know,” he said, his mouth full.

“What about you?” Martha asked.

“Oh, the ones that ran away,” he said, as if that was obvious. “I never stopped.”
He looked at Rose. *But you, love… You were inspired.*

Beeping from Jack’s wristband cut off any attempts to ask further questions. He flipped the cover up and read the message aloud.

“Encrypted channel with files attached. Don’t recognise it.”

The Doctor leaned forward. “Patch it through to the laptop,” he said as he wadded up the remains of his meal.

Jack looked uncharacteristically reluctant. “Since we’re telling stories, there’s something I haven’t told you.”

He pulled the laptop over and hit a button on his wrist device. The Doctor and Rose were looking over his shoulder when a familiar T logo popped up on screen.

The Doctor’s recoil rippled over the bond. “You work for Torchwood,” he said flatly, looking down at Jack.

Jack looked towards him, but didn’t meet his eye. “I swear to you, it’s different. It’s changed. There’s only half a dozen of us now.”

“Everything Torchwood did, and you’re part of it?” the Doctor spat out.

The Doctor had locked the memories of that day away, and even though Rose could have peeked, she respected his desire to not be reminded of how close they’d come to losing each other. But staring at the Torchwood logo, the memories broke through, and for only the second time, Rose watched through his eyes as she fell towards the Void. Even after eighteen months, his helplessness was devastating.

“The old regime was destroyed at Canary Wharf,” Jack insisted. “I rebuilt it, I changed it, and when I did that, I did it for you—in your honour.”

Jack finally looked up at the Doctor. Rose and Martha both held their breath, neither one sure how the stand-off between the men would play out.

The Doctor locked his memories back down, drew a breath, and looked away. He hit the play button with a little more force than was necessary, and the Torchwood logo was replaced by a woman sitting at a desk, her eyes wide with fear.

“If I haven’t returned to my desk by twenty-two hundred, this file will be emailed to Torchwood. Which means if you’re watching this, then I’m…” She let the sentence dangle and swallowed hard. “Anyway, the Saxon files are attached. But take a look at the Archangel document. That’s when it all started. When Harry Saxon became Minister in charge of launching the Archangel Network.”

The Doctor clicked on the attachment, and a computer rendering of a satellite system popped up on screen. “What’s the Archangel Network?”

Martha pulled her phone out and handed it to the Doctor. “I’ve got Archangel. Everyone’s got it.”

“It’s a mobile phone network,” Jack said, pointing at the monitor. “Because look, it’s gone worldwide. They’ve got fifteen satellites in orbit. Even the other networks, they’re all carried by Archangel.”

The Doctor sonicked Martha’s phone, already positive of what he’d find. “It’s in the phones! Oh, I
said he was a hypnotist. Wait, wait, wait. Hold on.” He tapped the phone against the table, and it quietly beeped the same four beat rhythm they’d heard everywhere since they arrived. “There it is. That rhythm, it’s everywhere, ticking away in the subconscious.”

“What is it, mind control?” Martha asked.

“No, no, no, no, no. It’s subtler than that,” the Doctor said. “Any stronger and people would question it. But contained in that rhythm, in layers of code, ‘Vote Saxon. Believe in me.’ Whispering to the world.”

Archangel solved another mystery, too. “Oh, yes! That’s how he hid himself from me, because I should have sensed there was another Time Lord on Earth. I should have known way back.” He looked up at Rose. “Even you should have felt him, Rose, though you wouldn’t have known the telepathic signature belonged to a Time Lord. But this signal cancelled him out.”

“Can you stop it, Doctor?” Rose asked.

He shook his head. “Not from down here. But now we know how he’s doing it.” There were so many ways he could use the satellite network against the Master, if he could just get access to it.

“And we can fight back,” Martha said, a genuine smile on her face for the first time since her family had been taken.

“Oh, yes!”

The Doctor picked up the sonic screwdriver, then looked at Martha. “Any objection to your phone and laptop being dismantled?”

“Not if it means we can rescue my family.”

“I thought you’d say that,” the Doctor said, already prying the back off the phone. “Rose, in the left pocket of my coat, there’s a magnifying glass that clips onto my glasses. Can you get it for me?”

He pulled the battery out of the phone and set it down on the table. Rose appeared at his side with the magnifying glass in hand, and he slipped it over the right lens of his glasses. The extra magnification gave him the precision he needed to take out exactly the pieces he needed from both devices.

“TARDIS keys,” he ordered as he finished up.

Three identical keys were handed to him. The Doctor took his own key out of his pocket, then rubbed his hands together and went back to work. With the sonic, he welded the telecommunication bits of the phone and laptop to the keys. Then he attached long pieces of twine to his, Jack’s, and Martha’s so they could wear them around their necks like Rose.

Finally, he straightened up. “Four TARDIS keys. Four pieces of the TARDIS, all with low level perception properties because the TARDIS is designed to blend in.” The imprecise explanation made him pause. “Well, sort of. But now, the Archangel Network’s got a second low level signal. Weld the key to the network and Martha—” He picked up his key and took a few steps back from the table. “Look at me. You can see me, yes?”

“Yep.”

“What about now?” The Doctor put his key around his neck.
Martha’s gaze drifted to the right. Jack chuckled when she closed her eyes and shook her head and tried to look at the Doctor again. Again, her gaze drifted.

When she clenched her eyes shut a second time, he waved and said, “No, I’m here. Look at me.”

“It’s like I know you’re there, but I don’t want to know,” she said.

“But I can see you just fine,” Rose said.

The Doctor looked at her, a crooked smile on his face. “You have a unique advantage.” A simple perception filter couldn’t touch the telepathic connection of a marriage bond.

She grasped his meaning immediately, but the strength of her self-reproach surprised him. Hey.

He waited for her to look at him, then continued. Don’t beat yourself up like that—it’s easy to forget the simplest things when you’re tired and under stress.

When some of her frustration faded, he looked back at Martha. “And back again.” The Doctor took his key off and jogged back over to the table. “See? It just shifts your perception a tiny little bit. Doesn’t make us invisible, just unnoticed,” he explained as he handed the keys out.

“So basically, it’ll be like I’m a maid again,” Martha muttered.

“Yes, well, it’ll keep us alive while we track down the Master and rescue your family, so let’s look on the bright side,” the Doctor countered.

He started to hustle them down the alley, but Rose restrained him with a gentle hand on his arm. We need to take a break.

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. Rose, we need to find the Master and take care of this.

There’s time, Doctor, especially if we use the Vortex manipulator. And Martha and Jack need to rest. They’ve been on their feet for almost 24 hours.

The Doctor shoved his hand through his hair. “We’ll go after the Master in two hours,” he said brusquely. “First, let’s get some rest. Jack, if this is one of your safehouses, I assume you have sleeping bags stashed someplace?”

“Yeah, give me a minute.”

The Doctor followed Jack into a smaller room and watched him open a crate of supplies. “Jack, I need to ask you to do something,” he said as Jack pulled out two sleeping bags.

His friend looked up from his work. “Anything.”

“I’ve got several plans to take care of the Master, but he tends to be a step ahead of me. Tomorrow, if Rose and I are both taken, you need to give the Vortex manipulator to Martha.”

“Why not send Rose away, too?”

The muscle in the Doctor’s jaw twitched. “If it’s possible, do it. But I know the Master; if I’m captured, there’s almost no chance he’ll let her get away.” He looked at Jack and answered the unspoken question. “He’ll be fascinated by your immortality, but as far as he’s concerned, Martha is just an ordinary human. She’s the only one who has a chance of getting away, and getting her out of there might be the only chance any of us have of surviving this.”

Jack paused with his hands on the lid to another crate. “Not to be morbid, but what happens to a
telepathic bond when one of you dies?”

The Doctor clenched his hands into fists. “It hurts like hell,” he said bluntly.

“You sound like you know that from experience.”

“During the Battle of Canary Wharf, Rose nearly fell into a parallel world. The TARDIS managed to save her, but I was cut off from our bond for twelve hours.” He didn’t bother mentioning that they’d only been engaged at the time; losing Rose now would be ten times more excruciating than those twelve hours had been. “Now you know why I hate Torchwood so much.”

Jack shook his head and pulled out the last two sleeping bags. “Jeeze, Doc. Is there anything the two of you haven’t gone through?”

The Doctor refused to answer that question. Saying no, they’d gone through everything, would tempt fate to think of new ways to torture them. Saying yes would be admitting it could get worse.

“Just promise me that if things go wrong, you’ll make sure Martha gets out of there.”

Jack nodded slowly. “You got it.” He rocked back on his heels and looked at the Doctor. “Your screwdriver is sonic.”

The non-sequitur made the Doctor blink. “Yes.”

“Is it able to neutralise sound?” The Doctor nodded, and Jack said, “You and Rose should sleep in here.”

Instead of feeling exasperated that his friend was once again commenting on his and Rose’s sex life, a chill went down the Doctor’s spine. Jack’s message was clear—if things went badly tomorrow, this might be his last chance to make love to Rose. Unable to speak, he nodded, then silently beckoned for her to join him.

“Sleep well, Doc,” Jack said as he left the room carrying two sleeping bags.

Rose walked in as Jack walked out. She stood in the doorway for a few moments, watching the Doctor unzip two sleeping bags and then zip them together. The underlying frenetic energy in his swift, economical movements made her tense in fear.

When their bed was ready, he swept the sonic around the room, concentrating on the door. His hand was shaking slightly when he put the sonic back in his coat pocket before taking it off and folding it up to use as a pillow.

He stared at her from the other side of the bed, and Rose finally recognised the emotion that had been driving him—desperation. She walked towards him, taking her own coat off and tossing it on top of his as she went.

She didn’t stop until she was standing in front of him. He raised a hand and ran it through her hair, letting the strands slip between his fingers.

“My Doctor,” Rose whispered, and those words broke the stillness that hung between them. The Doctor cupped her face between his hands and pressed a hard kiss to her lips, using his tongue to persuade her to open to him. While his lips and tongue took possession of her mouth, one of his hands moved to the small of her back to pull her close.

Rose’s hands went to his tie, undoing it quickly despite her shaking fingers. She dropped it, heedless
of where it fell, and attacked the buttons on his shirt next. As soon as his Adam’s apple was exposed, she pulled her lips away from his and latched onto it.

A groan rippled through the Doctor, and his hands dropped to the hem of her shirt. *Arms up,* he ordered after he’d tugged it up as far as he could, and Rose moved a half step away from him so he could pull her shirt over her head. She took advantage of the moment to push his jacket and Oxford off his shoulders and take his vest off.

The Doctor kissed her again while he worked at the fastener on her bra, growling in triumph when it gave way in his hands. Rose took it off and tossed it on top of their other clothes, then wrapped her arms around his neck.

She moaned when she felt his bare chest against hers, and the sound of her own voice reminded her of something. *The others…*

He traced a finger from her clavicle down to her sternum. *Can’t hear us. I soundproofed the room.* His gaze bore into her. *I need you, Rose. Let me make love to you?*

A moment later, Rose felt his telepathic touch, and the anxiety his plea had triggered was swept away by passion. *Yes,* she said, and allowed herself to be lowered to the makeshift bed.
Jack wasn’t surprised when he was the first one to wake up. Martha had desperately needed the rest, and the Doctor and Rose… He glanced at the door. They’d desperately needed each other.

After rolling up his sleeping bag and pulling his suspenders back up, he flipped his wrist comp open and scanned through the last two hours of government reports. When he got to the end, he bit out a curse.

“What’s happened?”

Jack turned towards the voice, and he smirked when he saw the Doctor was jacket-less and still tying his tie. “First contact is set for 0800 on the aircraft carrier Valiant. The President of the United States has arrived to take over from the Master.” He glanced at Martha, who was just pushing herself up from the floor. “He’s transferred the Jones family to the ship.”

“I’m going to kill him,” she said coldly.

All of the Doctor’s talk about plans going awry made Jack want to do this the easy way. “What say I use this perception filter to walk up behind him and break his neck?”

Rose joined them just as he said that, holding the Doctor’s jacket and coat. “That sounds like Torchwood, Jack,” she said as she helped the Doctor into his jacket.

Jack flushed. From the day he’d met her, Rose had always reminded him to be a better person. “Still a good plan,” he muttered defiantly.

“He’s a Time Lord, which makes him my responsibility,” the Doctor said as he pulled his coat on. “I’m not going to kill him. I’m going to save him.”

Jack and Martha looked at him in disbelief. That was his plan? No wonder he was afraid it wouldn’t work.

But the Doctor didn’t budge, and after a moment, Jack sighed and looked up the Valiant on his wrist comp. “Well, then we need to get on the Valiant. It’s a UNIT ship at fifty eight point two north, ten point oh two east,” he said, typing the coordinates into the Vortex manipulator.

“How do we get on board?” Martha asked.

The Doctor looked down at the Vortex manipulator. “We’ll use this.”

“I’ve already set the coordinates,” Jack told him.

The Doctor shook his head. “We’re not just going to use it as a teleport.” He pointed the sonic at the device and reset the time coordinates, explaining what he was doing as he worked. “First contact is scheduled for eight o’clock in the morning; let’s give ourselves two hours to get our bearings and track the Master down.”

Jack looked down at his Vortex manipulator, then at the Doctor. “Any chance you’ll leave me with a working device when we part ways?”
The Doctor ignored the question, though he filed it away in the back of his mind to think about later. “Before we go, I should give you a few instructions on your perception filters. Don’t run, don’t shout. Just keep your voice down. Draw attention to yourself and the spell is broken. Just keep to the shadows.”

“Like ghosts,” Jack said.

They all draped their keys around their necks. “Yeah, that’s what we are,” the Doctor agreed. “Ghosts.”

“Are we ready then?” Jack asked. When the Doctor nodded, they all put their hands on the Vortex manipulator, and the warehouse disappeared.

Rose groaned when they landed on the Valiant. Teleporting was nothing like Star Trek made it seem.

“Oh, that thing is rough,” Martha moaned, holding her head.

Jack groaned and cracked his neck. “I’ve had worse nights. Welcome to the Valiant.”

“Hold on, I thought this was a ship,” Martha said, peering out the porthole. “Where’s the sea?”

Rose looked over her shoulder and gasped; they were in the air.

“A ship for the twenty-first century,” Jack said. “Protecting the skies of planet Earth.”

“Come on,” the Doctor said. “We need to find the Master and figure out what’s going on.”

“Maybe figure out what’s going on first,” Rose suggested as they started running through the corridors.

The Doctor shot her a wounded look over his shoulder. “Oh sure—everyone’s a critic.”

They heard footsteps approaching and quieted as they turned the corner. After the group of UNIT soldiers passed by without noticing them, the Doctor pointed to a door.

“This way,” he said, pushing it open. “We’ll be less conspicuous in the service gangways.”

They’d only taken five steps when Rose heard it. She stopped running and focused on the familiar sound, trying to pinpoint which direction it was coming from.

“We’ve no time for sightseeing,” Jack said.

“Can’t you hear it, Doctor?”

He looked at her blankly for a moment, then a smile spread across his face and they both started running towards their ship.

“Doctor, my family’s on board,” Martha protested from behind them.

He didn’t stop running. “This way.”

“Trust us, Martha!” Rose said as they flew down a flight of stairs.
The sound got louder as they ran, until finally they pushed open a door and saw the TARDIS at the other end of the room. Rose didn’t stop, going forward to stroke her while the other three stood in the doorway of the storage room.

“Oh, at last!” the Doctor exclaimed.

Martha finally understood why they’d been running. “Oh, yes!”

“What’s it doing on the Valiant?” Jack asked as they walked towards the ship, and something about the way he said it stirred a glimmer of unease in Rose’s heart.

She listened to their beloved ship and realised she sounded just as weak and sick here as she had from a distance. The Doctor pushed the doors open before she could offer any warnings.

The console room glowed red, and the cloister bell tolled loudly. “What the hell’s he done?” Jack asked.

“Don’t touch it,” the Doctor snapped.

“I’m not going to,” Jack promised

Knowing he just meant the console, Rose laid a hand on one of the coral struts and shuddered at the uncomfortable sensations that came through from the TARDIS. Each toll of the cloister bell sent a wave of pain throbbing through her head.

“Doctor, what did he do to our ship?” she asked. “She hasn’t felt right in my head, but I didn’t know…”

“Sounds like it’s sick,” Martha said perceptively.

The Doctor circled the centre console, which was surrounded by a cage. “It can’t be. No, no, no, no, no, no, it can’t be.”

“Doctor, what is it?” Martha asked.

“He’s cannibalised the TARDIS.”

Jack looked at the reworked controls. “Is this what I think it is?”

“It’s a paradox machine.” The Doctor looked sharply at Rose. “You’ve been able to feel her since we got back from the end of the universe?”

Rose nodded. “Yeah. I tried to find her yesterday afternoon, and then last night, she reached out for me… I think she was trying to warn me about this.”

“Probably.” He bent down and tapped at a gauge on the metal mesh. “As soon as this hits red, it activates. At this speed, it’ll trigger at two minutes past eight,” he said, after checking it against Jack’s watch.

“First contact is at eight, then two minutes later,” Jack said.

“What’s it for? What does a paradox machine do?” asked Martha.

“Sustains a paradox, keeps it from collapsing,” Rose said automatically. *What is the Master doing that requires a paradox machine?* she wondered.
“Right. And I can’t stop it till I know what it’s doing,” the Doctor added. “Touch the wrong bit, blow up the solar system.”

Martha squatted down on the floor next to him. “Then we’ve got to get to the Master.”

Jack nodded. “Yeah. You said you had a way to take care of him.”

The Doctor nodded grimly. “We need to get up to the flight deck where all the VIPs are.”

The Doctor took Rose’s hand as they ran through the corridors. If something happens to me, I want you to run, he told her fiercely.

Her refusal was instantaneous, and he yanked on her arm as he turned a sharp corner. Rose, please. If he has both of us…

If he takes you, what are the chances I’ll even be able to get away?

The Doctor didn’t respond, but he knew she could pick the answer up easily.

Exactly. So succeed or fail, we stick together. For better, or for worse.

The Doctor didn’t bother reminding her that they hadn’t used human vows.

When they slipped onto the flight deck, President Winters was talking while the Master and his wife watched from seats on the opposite side of a conference table. The Doctor ignored them both. He had his key out, but before he approached the Master, he wanted to see if there was anything he could use as an alternative, if this didn’t work.

His eyes lit on a digital countdown clock on the wall, and the idea that had stirred in his head when he’d seen the paradox machine percolated. He watched the numbers ticking down and realised whatever it counted down to was a year and a day away. That was a long time to wait, but at least it gave him a backup plan.

He felt Rose’s eyes on him, so he carefully locked that thought down and led her, Jack, and Martha to the back of the room.

“This plan, you going to tell us?” Jack asked, sotto voce, while the President continued to speak.

The Doctor held his key up. “If I can get this around the Master’s neck, cancel out his perception filter, they’ll see him for real. It’s just hard to go unnoticed with everyone on red alert.” He looked at Jack. “If they stop me, you’ve got a key.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’ll get him,” Martha muttered.

Rose just glared at him, and he knew she’d noticed how many redundancies he’d built into his plan, and what that meant. He winced; she didn’t know the half of it.

But there wasn’t time for an argument now, and they both knew it. He wrapped his hand around the key dangling from his neck and walked slowly towards the Master, while the President introduced the Toclafane.

“And I ask you now, I ask of the human race, to join with me in welcoming our friends. I give you the Toclafane.”
He turned slightly and held a hand up, and four spheres appeared. “My name is Arthur Coleman Winters, President-Elect of the United States of America, and designated representative of the United Nations. I welcome you to the planet Earth and its associated moon.”

The Toclafane didn’t seem impressed by the President.

“You’re not the Master.”

“We like the Mr. Master.”

“We don’t like you.”

The spheres rotated positions, hovering around Winters, and the man smiled uneasily. “I can be master, if you so wish. I will accept mastery over you, if that is God’s will.”

The Doctor had reached the other side of the room and started moving forward. The Master was still six feet away from him, but with the guards standing behind him, it would be hard to get any closer without being noticed. Even with a perception filter, he would be seen if he walked directly in between someone and what they were focused on.

The Toclafane were still flying around the President’s head, stating their displeasure with the sudden substitution.

“Man is stupid.”

“Master is our friend.”

“Where’s my Master, pretty please?”

The Doctor was only three feet away from the Master when the other Time Lord answered the call. “Oh, all right then. It’s me.” He sprang out of his seat and turned to face the crowd. “Ta da! Sorry, sorry, I have this effect. People just get obsessed. Is it the smile? Is it the aftershave? Is it the capacity to laugh at myself? I don’t know. It’s crazy.”

“Saxon, what are you talking about?” President Winters demanded.

The Master spun towards him and leaned against the conference table, with his arms crossed over his chest. “I’m taking control, Uncle Sam, starting with you.” He nodded at his Toclafane. “Kill him.”

One of the spheres soared forward, multiple weapons extended. It pointed one at Winters and disintegrated him.

The remaining dignitaries in the room ducked behind the chairs, while their guards drew guns and trained them on the spheres.

The Master clapped and laughed gleefully. “Guards.”

His guards stood at the front of the room, pointing their weapons at the crowd. “Nobody move! Nobody move!”

The Master jogged up the steps leading to the bridge and looked at the still-rolling camera. “Now then, peoples of the Earth. Please attend carefully.”

The Doctor saw his chance slipping away. Throwing caution to the wind, he took his key off and tried to rush for the Master. He didn’t even get halfway there before he was stopped by two armed guards. “Stop him!” a third guard shouted.
The Master looked down at him from the bridge. “We meet at last, Doctor.” He laughed. “I love saying that.”

“Stop it! Stop it now!” the Doctor ordered.

“As if a perception filter’s going to work on me,” the Master scoffed. “And look, it’s the girlie and the freak. Although, I’m not sure which one’s which.”

The Doctor felt a spurt of hope when the Master only mentioned one woman. Maybe, somehow, he didn’t realise Rose was here, too.

*I’m trying to stay out of sight, she told him. I figure I can do more to help if I’m not captured.*

*Good plan, love.* He braced himself for her annoyance, but he wanted to be clear that he wouldn’t hold it against her if she chose to escape. *And you can always—*

Their conversation was cut short when Jack ran forward, and the Master pulled something out of his pocket and shot him. The Doctor felt the odd pulling in time that always happened when he watched Jack die. The Master held his tool up. “Laser screwdriver. Who’d have sonic? And the good thing is, he’s not dead for long.” He pointed down at Jack and grinned maniacally. “I get to kill him again!”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Martha run to Jack. Trusting him to give her the teleport as they’d discussed, the Doctor focused on Rose.

*Rose, Jack’s giving Martha the Vortex manipulator. If you can get to her, you can both get out of here.*

*No! I told you, I’m not leaving you alone with him. Send Martha away if you need to, but I’m gonna stay here with you.*

The Doctor gritted his teeth at her stubbornness, but he had to admit that if their places were reversed, he wouldn’t leave Rose behind, either.

He took a deep breath through his nose and tried to get himself under control. “Master, just calm down. Just look at what you’re doing. Just stop. If you could see yourself—”

“Oh, do excuse me,” the Master said to the television cameramen who were still filming. “Little bit of personal business. Back in a minute.” He looked at the guards holding the Doctor down. “Let him go.”

They shoved the Doctor down onto the floor. He pushed himself up and looked at the Master. “It’s that sound. The sound in your head. What if I could help?”

“Oh, how to shut him up?” The Master rolled his eyes and mimed talking with his hand. “*I know!*” He grinned widely and gestured to someone in the back of the room.

The Doctor heard a brief scuffle, and that combined with the sudden anger from Rose told him exactly what had happened. He tried to reach for her when she was pushed to the front of the room, but the guards grabbed his hands and held them behind his back.

“Did you really think I would let Rose Tyler go free?” The Master shook his head and tsked. “It’s been too long since we’ve seen each other, if you could misjudge me so badly. I’ve got your bond mate, Doctor. Your little human-Time Lord hybrid.” He twirled his laser screwdriver between his fingers. “If I remember correctly, you aren’t positive she’ll be able to regenerate. And—again, if memory serves—you aren’t too keen to find out.” His smile disappeared and he pointed the
screwdriver at Rose. “Have you changed your mind?”

The Doctor seethed with rage, but he couldn’t do anything but shake his head. He wouldn’t risk Rose’s life.

The Master laughed. “Look at what Earth’s defender has been reduced to. Cowering on the floor, paralysed out of fear for his bond mate’s life.”

The look Rose gave the Doctor now was the same trusting, confident look he’d seen on her face when they’d stood in 10 Downing Street, faced with the choice to save the world at the possible cost of her life. It was a look which said she trusted him to do the right thing, to make the best choice.

He drew in a deep breath. When he’d developed his backup plan, he’d really hoped Rose would leave with Martha. Sentencing himself to a year in the gracious hospitality of the Master was one thing—leaving Rose in his hands for 366 days was entirely another.

One of the guards holding Rose twisted hard on her arm and then pushed her down onto the floor. The Doctor’s restraint broke when she gasped in pain and he felt an echo of her discomfort blossom out from his wrist and elbow. He yanked his arms free of the guards, but he’d only taken one step when the other guard pistol whipped him in the face. He went down with a groan, a ringing sound in his ears.

He could have gotten right back up, but this gave him the opportunity he needed to put his plan into action.

“Doctor!”

Rose’s panic screamed over their bond, and he remembered that she would have felt the same dull pain he had when the gun hit his cheek. *I’m fine, love,* he reassured her, still not moving from his prone position. Her fear eased, and he nearly burst out laughing when she hurled inventive alien curses at the Master.

“Was that Atreyun?” the Master questioned. “I’m not sure what you just suggested is even possible for a race that excretes their waste through their skin, so I applaud the linguistic effort it took to translate that curse into their language.”

Still sitting with Jack, Martha stared at her friends, a hand pressed to her mouth as she struggled to take it all in. The Doctor was on the ground, apparently passed out, Rose was shouting at the Master, and Jack was temporarily dead.

Jack gasped and sat up partway. “Teleport,” he muttered under his breath, passing her the Vortex manipulator.

“I can’t!” she protested.

“We can’t stop him,” Jack told her. “Get out of here. Get out.”

Martha slipped the teleport into her pocket and moved to the Doctor’s side. Even Time Lords could get concussions, and that guard had pistol whipped him hard enough to send him to the ground.

“Doctor? I’ve got you.” She breathed a sigh of relief when he groaned and sat up with his head in his hands.

“Ah, she’s a would-be doctor,” the Master said. “But tonight, Martha Jones, we’ve flown them in all the way from prison.”
Martha watched in horror as her mum, dad, and Tish were led in in chains. “Come on, move,” the guard ordered.

“Mum.”

Her mum was in tears. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know what to do—he had Tish.”

“The Toclafane,” the Doctor groaned from the floor. “What are they? Who are they?”

The Master crouched down in front of him. “Doctor, if I told you the truth, your hearts would break,” he said, putting his hand over the Doctor’s hearts.

The Toclafane buzzed around in excitement, and Martha remembered that the paradox machine had been timed for two minutes after eight.

“Is it time? Is it ready?”

“Is the machine singing?”

The Master looked at his watch. “Two minutes past.” He went back up to the bridge and turned to face the cameras. “So, Earthings. Basically, um, end of the world.” He held his laser screwdriver up over his head. “Here come the drums!”

Martha blinked when “Voodoo Child” by Rogue Trader blasted over the sound system. She heard a muted gasp beside her and looked down at the Doctor and Rose, who wore matching grimaces.

The Master ran to the porthole and the Doctor tried to ignore the twinned feelings of a paradox ripping through the fabric of time, and the TARDIS crying in pain. As soon as he had a chance, he had to tell Martha what to do.

The Master’s wife danced to the music on the bridge, and the Master went back to her side, blowing a kiss down to the Doctor and Rose before leading his wife up to the large front windows. The Doctor pondered briefly that he looked quite a bit like the Wicked Witch of the West, sending her flying monkeys out. He almost expected the Master to say, “Fly, my pretties! Fly!”

He didn’t have time to think about it long though. With the Master’s back turned, this was the perfect opportunity for him to tell Martha what to do.

“Listen to me, Martha,” he whispered. She leaned closer, her ear next to his mouth. “I have a plan to defeat the Master, but it’s going to take a while, and I need you to do the leg work.”

“Anything.” She looked at him with hard eyes, and the Doctor tried not to think about how much harder she would become in the year ahead of her.

“I’m going to integrate myself into the matrices of the Archangel network. I need you to take the Vortex manipulator and go back to Earth, telling as many people as you can to think my name at the same time.”

“What time? What’s the countdown point?”

He winced. “That’s the harder part,” he admitted. “Do you see that clock on the wall over there, counting down to one year from tomorrow?”

Martha pulled back and looked at him incredulously. “You’re going to spend a year on this ship—you and Rose both.”
The Doctor’s lips pulled back from his teeth in a snarl. “We don’t have a choice,” he spat out.

“And you want me to spend a year wandering the Earth, telling people about you?”

“It’s our only chance.”

To emphasise the severity of the situation, the Master gave a new order to his Toclafane. “Remove one-tenth of the population.”

As the Doctor and Martha finished their conversation, they both heard the various calls for help coming over the horn from people who weren’t aware of what had happened on the ship. Geneva and London both called. The Doctor raised his eyebrows and looked beseechingly at Martha.

Martha nodded slowly and stood up. She kept her gaze trained on the Master as she backed away, and then she closed her eyes and pressed the button on the Vortex manipulator.

One of the guards shouted for the Master, and he raised his eyebrows when he turned around and realised Martha was gone. “Oh, you’ve been naughty, Doctor,” he crooned, “sending your companion away. But it’s no matter. There’s nothing she can do to stop me. Would you like to see what I’m doing?”

He nodded to the guards, and the Doctor and Rose were dragged up onto the bridge, over to the windows. When they tried to look away from the carnage below, strong hands grabbed their heads and forced them to watch. Millions of Toclafane continued to soar down to the planet’s surface, their sole mission to kill and terrorise humanity.

The Master leaned close and whispered in the Doctor’s ear. “And so it came to pass that the human race fell, and the Earth was no more. And I looked down upon my new dominion as Master of all, and I thought it good.”

Chapter End Notes

So, Rose will be on the Valiant for the Year That Never Was. The closer we’ve gotten to the Master arc, the more worried questions I’ve gotten regarding her fate during this year. I want to tell you, up front, that she will not be raped. Yeah, that’s a spoiler, but considering how big of a trigger that is for some people, I want to set everyone’s mind at ease. No rape, not by the Master, and not by the guards.
Always Together, Even When We're Apart

Chapter Notes

Martha’s activity in this section is largely based on The Story of Martha by Dan Abnett. Since there’s a canon account of her first six months walking the Earth, I figured why not use it and make things easier on myself? Most of the dialogue is either original or heavily reworked.

Chapter 42: Always Together, Even When We’re Apart

Rose focused on Martha’s escape instead of the Toclafane swarming outside the ship. She’d breathed a sigh of relief when her friend disappeared; as long as one of them was free, they still had a chance to defeat the Master.

The Master turned around, and she tensed at the smug expression on his face. “In all the excitement, I haven’t eaten breakfast,” he said congenially. “Doctor, would you and your lovely bond mate care to join myself and Lucy for brunch?”

The Doctor and Rose looked at each other warily, but they couldn’t exactly decline. They both nodded slowly, and the Master clapped his hands together. “Excellent!” he chirped. “My personal chef has something ready for us in the Captain’s Mess.”

The guards led them off of the flight deck and down a corridor to a spacious room with a nicer dining table than Rose had expected to find on a military vessel. The narrow surface was laid with several platters of steaming food and, to her embarrassment, Rose’s stomach growled loudly.

The Master smirked at her, then turned and tutted at the Doctor. “Doctor, I’m surprised. Don’t you feed your bond mate?” He pulled out a chair, and Rose was guided into it by the burly guard holding her arm. A female guard pushed the Doctor to sit directly across from her, leaving the seats at the ends of the table for the Master and his wife.

Rose clenched her hand into a fist and rested it on her leg. She wanted—no, needed—to touch the Doctor, but he was just out of reach. She sighed and took a slice of toast, and as she spread butter on it, she felt his foot brush against her calf before he lowered it to the floor and hooked it around her ankle. It wasn’t much, but the tactile reminder that he was there with her relaxed her enough to tuck into her breakfast with gusto.

The Master reached for the teapot and poured for everyone, and when he was done, he took his seat and loaded his plate with eggs, hash browns, and thick rashers of bacon. “The traditional English fry-up,” he said conversationally. “There are a few things to recommend this backwater planet you’re so fond of, Doctor.”

Lucy Saxon cut into her sausage and took a dainty bite, then set her fork and knife down. “Harry says you’ve been the Doctor’s companion for almost four years, Rose.”

It was on the tip of Rose’s tongue to counter that she was a hell of a lot more than the Doctor’s
companion, but she bit back the words and took a sip of tea while she waited for the impulse to pass.

“That’s right,” she said after setting her cup down.

Lucy shuddered delicately. “Harry took me on one trip. It was incredible, but I don’t think I could do it again. It’s so bumpy and unpredictable.”

Rose narrowed her eyes. “I think she’s brilliant.”

The Master broke in. “If I had my TARDIS, I’d show you what time travel is meant to be like.”

“No, ta,” Rose said, her voice short. “I’m perfectly fine with how our TARDIS flies.”

“You TARDIS?” The Master pursed his lips. “TARDISes belong to the Time Lords who bond with them. You are only a hybrid.”

Rose felt the Doctor echo her surprise. Does he not realise… the Doctor asked.

Rose thought over the conversation Professor Yana had overheard between Jack and the Doctor. No, you never said.

They exchanged a quick glance. If the Master didn’t know she was connected to the TARDIS at all, that would certainly be an advantage for them.

After a few minutes of silence, the Master spoke again. “Do you know, I’ve never had the privilege of talking to a bonded couple before.”

Something about the way he said it sent a shiver down Rose’s spine.

“Did the Doctor tell you, Miss Tyler, that bonding wasn’t common any longer on Gallifrey?”

She looked across the table at the Doctor, and a hint of red flushed his cheeks.

The Master chuckled. “I see he didn’t.” He took a bite of bacon and egg, and then said, “It was considered beneath us—well, beneath the Time Lords, at least. Ordinary Gallifreyans still bonded all the time, but without the regeneration aspect, it didn’t mean as much to them. After all, the whole reason Time Lords kept the old custom was to stabilise relationships during the tumultuous period surrounding regeneration. But by our time, the regeneration process no longer caused the turbulent change it brought in the past—for competent Time Lords, at least. Tying your mind to another was unnecessary, as well as being hopelessly archaic and sentimental.”

Rose met the Doctor’s eyes and smiled. I love you.

“And, of course, it was a tactical weakness.”

They both froze, then looked at the Master, who was leaning back in his chair, smirking.

“Doctor, your telepathic shields have always been strong enough to keep me out. But your bond mate here—well, she’s only been telepathic for two years. And if I can break down her walls, then how simple would it be to follow your bond with her and enter your mind?”

The Doctor’s jaw clenched. “I doubt you’ll find it as easy to break Rose’s barriers as you think, Master.”

“Hmmm… maybe not.” The Master tapped his fork against his plate in an echo of the drums beating in his head. “But I’m so looking forward to trying.”
The Master pushed back from the table. “Not today, though. I’ve got far too much to do.”

Rose and the Doctor looked at each other uneasily.

“Oh, you don’t need to get up,” the Master said politely. “Please, eat your fill. The guards will take you to the rooms I prepared for you when you’re done.”

He paused at the door. “They do have instructions to shoot you if you try to touch,” he added. “Bye-bye!”

Rose’s appetite was gone, but the Master’s mercurial temperament made her question when she’d next get a decent meal. She and the Doctor ate in silence, and when they stood, the guards led them from the room.

When they came to an intersection between corridors, Rose’s stomach jolted unpleasantly when she was prodded to go straight while the Doctor was directed to turn. “Wait a minute!” she demanded. “Why’re you splitting us up?”

The guard assigned to her rolled his eyes. “Our Master isn’t foolish enough to leave you in the same room,” he sneered. “You’ll have individual quarters for the duration of your stay on board the Valiant.”

The Doctor didn’t seem surprised by that announcement, and Rose supposed she shouldn’t be either. But still, the thought that they wouldn’t see each other for who knew how long made her chest tighten.

_Rose, we’ll be fine. Don’t forget, we have this._ The small hint of connection offered by his subtle caress along the bond calmed her slightly, and she lifted her chin.

“Well, if we’re gonna be split up, I want a last kiss.”

The Doctor’s guard snorted, and Rose turned to glare at her.

“Look, you can’t tell me your Master wouldn’t enjoy the thought of us bein’ driven to beg,” she snapped. “You can go back to him and tell him how pathetic we were, and you know he’ll laugh.”

The two guards exchanged a look, then finally the Doctor’s shrugged and pushed him forward. Rose grabbed the lapels of his coat and closed her eyes when he pressed his forehead to hers.

_I love you, you brilliant woman_, the Doctor told her. One of his hands dropped to her hip to pull her close while the other threaded through her hair to tip her head back so he could kiss her.

_Rose told him as she slipped her tongue into his mouth. Oh God, I love you so much._

The Doctor made a soft sound in the back of his throat, then his tongue pushed into Rose’s mouth and tenderness was swept away by passion. The desperate edge to the embrace added a touch of carnality they wouldn’t normally have indulged in with witnesses standing by, but today, Rose couldn’t care less who saw them snogging. She carded her fingers through his hair and tugged, and the Doctor dropped his hands to her bum and pulled her closer.
A hand on her shoulder pulled her away from the Doctor. “That’s enough,” her guard said gruffly. “You said kiss, not shag in the middle of the corridor.”

The Doctor bounced on his toes. “Well, you know,” he said brightly, “I’ve always believed in making the most of opportunities.”

Rose bit her lip to stifle a giggle. When he winked at her, she realised his insouciance was solely for her benefit, to make their last moments together easier for her.

She grinned at him, letting her tongue peek out. “Oh, you definitely make the most of every moment,” she said, innuendo dripping from her voice.

The guards both grunted in disgust, then the woman grabbed the Doctor by the arm and dragged him away. “Come on,” she snarled. “We let you have your moment; now it’s time to say goodbye.”

The Doctor looked back at Rose and waved merrily, as if they would only be parted for a few hours. Rose shook her head fondly and waved back.

The accommodations that had been prepared for them turned out to be officers’ quarters. Much like a dorm room, there was a bed, a table, a wardrobe, a dresser, and a closed door that the Doctor assumed led to the lavatory. All in all, it was nicer than he’d expected.

He turned a slow circle, his hands in his pockets, and nodded approvingly. “This will do nicely.”

The guard snorted. “So glad you approve.” She dropped a plastic tub on the table. “Now, empty your pockets. And since our Master has told us they’ll be bigger on the inside, I want you to take your clothes off and tip them upside down, so there’s no chance of you hiding anything.”

Despite the indignity of being forced to strip to his pants and oxford in front of a stranger, the Doctor held his head high as he obeyed her orders. Her eyebrows rose as various bits of detritus continued to pour from his pockets, and he grabbed a white bag and offered it to her.

“Jelly baby?”

The blonde woman took the bag from him and inspected the contents, then rolled her eyes and dropped it on the table. “You can keep those,” she told him, then looked at the tub, which was three-quarters full.

The Doctor popped a sweet into his mouth, then said, “A little more than you were expecting… what was your name?”

She straightened her spine and glared at him. “ADC Dexter.”

The Doctor whistled. “The Master’s aide-de-camp,” he mused. “Not just a guard, then.”

Her eyes glittered with pride. “Our Master trusts me more than anyone.”

The Doctor pulled his clothes back on. “Oh, I’m sure he does.”

Dexter scowled at him and carried the tub full of his belongings to the door. “Meals will be brought to you at 7:30, noon, and 6:00. You’ll find changes of clothes in the wardrobe and toiletries in the lavatory. Anything else you want will need to be discussed with a guard. You can call one by pressing this button.” She pointed at a doorbell on the wall, then shifted her hand to indicate the small
camera over the door. “The security camera is always running, twenty-four hours a day.”

The Doctor put his hands in his pockets. “I expected nothing less,” he said truthfully.

Dexter nodded sharply. “I’ll leave you to get used to your accommodations now.”

After she left, the Doctor wandered the room, opening and closing doors. The lavatory was small but functional, with a toilet, pedestal sink, and a shower stall. The clothes in the wardrobe were less satisfactory. He wrinkled his nose when he saw the boring dark grey suits in the wardrobe with their even boring-er plain black ties.

_They’re dressing me like a detective inspector_, he grumbled, and closed the door.

Once he’d inspected his surroundings, he didn’t have anything to keep himself occupied with. It was tempting to reach for Rose and pull them both into the bond, but after the Master’s questions, he was wary of making it too obvious how much he depended on her presence in his mind. They could communicate freely without anyone being the wiser, but taking the bond to its deepest level gave the appearance that they were asleep; the Master would recognise it immediately.

He paced the small confines of the room, running his hand through his hair over and over. He’d expected the Master to capture them both if he caught one of them, but that didn’t make it any easier to accept Rose being in the Master’s grasp for the next 366 days.

His hand drifted to his shirt pocket, but the guards hadn’t noticed the picture of Rose, and he wanted to keep it that way for as long as possible.

Still, they could talk, and they spent the afternoon sharing what they’d found in their rooms. She was just as unimpressed by the clothes as he was, though all she’d tell him was that the Master was dressing her like a chav. When Rose discovered a stack of books tucked away in her dresser, the Doctor rifled through his drawers and discovered he had some, too.

He picked up one book he was very familiar with. _I could read to you, if you want_. Rose’s affirmative was clear, so the Doctor took off his suit jacket and sat down on the bed, with his back to the wall. He opened the book to the first page and began.

_In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozzy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort._

When dinner came at 6:00, the Doctor used a bookmark to hold their place and set the book down. He ate quickly, eager to be done with the meal and go back to reading to Rose, but when she was done eating, she told him she was going to take a shower before bed.

Finally, the lights in the room dimmed slowly, and the Doctor took off his jacket and tie and laid down on his bed. As soon as he was ready, he reached for Rose and sighed when he felt her reaching for him in return.

_I’m sorry_, he said.

Rose’s exasperation coloured their bond. _This isn’t your fault_, she told him. _If we ran into one of my old schoolmates and discovered they’d gone completely insane, blowing things up and claiming they were going to take over the world, would you blame me?_

The Doctor ran a hand over his face. _Of course not._
She easily picked up on the fact that her argument hadn’t swayed him, and he felt a twinge of remorse when he sensed her weariness. Can we just… not talk about anything? I just need you to hold me tonight.

Together, they deepened their connection until they were wrapped in the full communion of their bond. Pulling a desire from Rose, the Doctor directed their shared experience, and a moment later, they were lying together in their own bed. Of all the ways they’d used telepathy over the last two years, none had meant as much as the simple feeling that they were at home, where they belonged.

Rose relaxed into his embrace and wrapped one of her arms around his waist. I love you.

I love you too, Rose. Picking up on her slight headache, he massaged her scalp gently. How are you feeling? he asked, the headache making him worried that the TARDIS would be too ill to offer Rose the assistance she depended on.

I’m fine, she assured him. She feels a bit off, but I can tell she’s still there, helping out. I might have to sleep like a regular human, but that’s not so bad.

The Doctor ran a hand through her hair and silently thanked their ship. Good. At least that’s one thing we don’t need to worry about. And… He hesitated, but dove in after a moment. I am sorry this happened. Even if it isn’t my fault.

Rose shook her head. Don’t focus on being sorry, she told him. Focus on finding a way for us to get out of here.

The Doctor tried to clamp down on the truth, but Rose caught it. You already have a way.

He ran a hand up and down her back. As soon as I saw the TARDIS, I started thinking about a backup plan. It’s a bit more involved, and it’ll take longer, but it’ll work.

How much longer?

His hand stopped moving. A year, he finally told her. And I can’t tell you anything more, Rose. The Master knows me well enough to know I’ll come up with something, and when he asks if you know my plan, it’ll be better if you can honestly say you don’t.

Rose pressed a kiss to his chest. Why do you think he didn’t visit either of us today?

Knowing him? The Doctor snorted; this was classic Master. He enjoyed making us squirm at breakfast this morning, and now he’ll wait until we’ve almost convinced ourselves that he’s going to ignore us for good.

Your old mate is a sadistic bastard.

The Doctor laughed humourlessly. Yep.

There was a moment of silence, then Rose propped herself up and looked down at him. So… speaking of things that made us squirm at breakfast…

It took the Doctor a moment to catch on to what she was saying, but when he did, his face flamed.

Her eyes sparkled, and her tongue peeked out when she smiled at him. I never would have taken you for an old-fashioned bloke.

Not old-fashioned, but I was a renegade. I didn’t like to do anything the way the rest of the Time
Lords thought it should be done. He wrinkled his nose at the memory of their stuffy rules, then smiled up at Rose. And truthfully, Rose... from the first time my mind touched yours, I knew it would never be enough. I needed you.

She blushed delightfully, and the Doctor cradled her face between his hands and kissed her. The awareness that they were being observed and taped made it easy to keep the embrace chaste. He really didn’t want to know what telepathic intimacy would look like to an outside observer—similar to a wet dream, he imagined.

Rose broke the kiss to yawn, and the Doctor encouraged her to rest her head on his chest again. Go to sleep, love.

He was awake long after Rose drifted off, holding her close and considering how different this was from what it would have been like if Rose weren’t there. A year in the Master’s company wouldn’t be pleasant, but with Rose at is side, he could handle whatever his adversary threw at him.

oOoOoOoOo

“It’s been two weeks.” The Master threw the report on Martha Jones onto the table, and the papers scattered. “How has one pathetic human evaded capture for two weeks?”

Dexter stood at attention. “She must still have the perception filter, sir.”

The Master scowled. “The key doesn’t make her invisible; it just makes you not want to see her. Haven’t you found someone in the Unified Containment Forces who could see through that?”

She handed him a second folder. “I believe so, sir. UCFA Griffin. You need someone with tenacity if they’re going to look beyond the perception filter. Griffin has that—and the team he’s assembled is exceptional.”

The Master took the folder and skimmed its contents quickly. “Do it. And Dexter?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Tell them this is a personal favour to me. Let them know that when they find Jones, we’ll make it worth their while.” He stared at her. “Hard target. I don’t care if they bring her in dead or alive, as long as the Doctor’s pet isn’t still walking free.”

oOoOoOoOo

After two weeks, Rose started to hope the Master would simply leave them to rot in their rooms. Of course, the next day, her door opened at three in the afternoon—directly between lunch and dinner—and the Master walked in.

“I hope I didn’t keep you waiting,” he said. “This whole ruling a planet business is actually more work than I thought it would be.”

“You’ll excuse me if I don’t feel sympathetic for your workload,” Rose said sarcastically.

The Master ran his fingers over the tabletop. “How have you found your accommodations? I did leave instructions with the guards to give you anything you asked for, except of course for the key to the door.”

Rose nodded at the pile of books stacked up on her desk. “I’ve been using the time to catch up on a little reading.”
“Excellent.” The Master tapped his fingers against the books in the four-beat rhythm Rose had come to hate. “What about sleeping? I assume your bed is comfortable enough, since you’ve been sleeping over eight hours a night, like an ordinary human.”

Rose forced her features to remain even. The last thing she wanted was for the Master to discover his interference with the TARDIS had affected her own health. “Well, as you keep pointing out, I’m only a hybrid, after all.” She narrowed her eyes. “Why are you being so considerate?”

“I just think hospitality is a lost art, don’t you?”

“You’ve got a different definition of hospitality than I’ve ever heard,” Rose said. “For one, what kind of host splits a couple up into separate rooms?”

His lips turned out in a pout. “I thought you would understand the limitations put on me by the unique situation.”

“The unique situation being that you’ve wrongfully imprisoned both of us? Yeah, that doesn’t make me feel very understanding.”

“Well, if that’s what you think, I’ll just skip over the pleasantries and get straight to my purpose.” He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the wall. “Why did the Doctor send Martha Jones away on Day Zero?”

Rose stared at him for a moment, then laughed bitterly. “You’ve gotta be kidding me. Martha’s our friend. Why wouldn’t he send her away from the resident psychopath?”

The Master rolled his eyes. “Are you really trying to tell me he was simply looking out for her? No. I’ve seen the security footage from that day—he whispered something in her ear before she left. What did he tell her to do?”

“I don’t know,” Rose replied, “and even if I did, I wouldn’t tell you.”

Underneath her sarcastic cover, Rose’s nerves were taut. This was the moment the Doctor had warned her about, when the Master would ask her what his plan was. It would be a trick to convince him that she didn’t know.

She snorted. “Let me get this straight. You think the Doctor has some kind of secret mission to defeat you, and for some reason, you think I’m going to tell you what it is.”

The Master’s smile pressed into a thin line. “You will either tell me, or I will find out, whether you like it or not.”

“Yeah? And how do you plan to do that, then?”

The smug smirk was back, and Rose wanted to smack it off his face.

“I can tell you’re a telepath… what kind of barriers do you have?”

Rose smiled and reclined in her seat when she realised what the Master planned to do. “Why don’t you find out?” she invited. Surprise flickered across the Master’s face, and Rose’s confidence grew. Even if he could get past her own barriers, he’d told them the first day that the Doctor was capable of keeping him out.

*What protects one, protects both,* she remembered from their wedding day.
“You think you’ll be able to keep me out of your mind?” He pushed off the wall and walked over to her. “I have hundreds of years experience using telepathy, not to mention my little talent for manipulating human and Time Lord minds. Or have you forgotten?” He tapped his four beats against her forehead. “It doesn’t matter how strong a telepath you are; it’s still a new skill to you.”

“Then there’s no reason why you shouldn’t just dive straight into my mind, is there?” Rose challenged.

His eyes narrowed. “You are remarkably impertinent for someone who is at my complete mercy.”

Rose’s amusement caught the Doctor’s attention, too. I’m toying with the Master, she told him. He thinks it will be easy to break my telepathic barriers, since I’m a rank amateur compared to him. A sharp wave of anger washed over her via the bond, and she soothed it away. I’m not saying I’m happy he’s gonna try to get into my mind, but we both know he won’t succeed. Just be ready, okay?

He calmed somewhat, and Rose felt his presence in her mind strengthen as he reinforced his own barriers in preparation for the attack. Ready, he said, and just in time.

The Master pulled a chair around to her side of the table. Then he pressed his fingers into Rose’s temples, his hold not nearly as gentle as the Doctor’s had been when they had connected in this way. A moment later, Rose felt him pushing against her mind, trying to get in, but he was repelled so quickly, she barely noticed his presence.

A furrow appeared in his brow, and he yanked his hands away and shook his head. He looks like he’s got telepathic whiplash, Rose realised as she watched him rub at his forehead.

“How did you do that?” he demanded.

“Couldn’t you tell, Harry?” Rose asked, deciding on a whim to call him by the human name his wife preferred.

“It felt like…” The Master frowned, then surged forward both physically and telepathically. This time, instead of bouncing out, he was simply stopped dead at the entrance to her mind.

His eyes opened wide when he pulled back. “Of course. The bond allows you to share telepathic barriers with your bond mate.”

Rose leaned back in her chair. “You really thought my husband would leave me so vulnerable to an attack?”

The Master scowled. “I had forgotten that bond mates had that capability.”

Rose pressed her lips together to hide a smile. She’d used the word husband out of habit, since she and the Doctor always used the human titles in public. But the Master seemed genuinely annoyed that she wouldn't call the Doctor her bond mate, and she added that to her growing list of ways to irritate him.

“Maybe it’s not such a tactical weakness, after all.”

His familiar smirk settled back over his features. “Oh, I’m afraid that’s where you’re wrong, Miss Tyler. I might not be able to invade your mind, but there are other ways your bond can be used against you.” He looked at his watch. “However, I don’t have time to explore them today. Cheerio!” He waggled his fingers, then left the room.

Rose paced after he left, running her hands through her hair and biting her lip. For one, brief
moment, she’d felt like they had the upper hand, finally. The surprise on the Master’s face when he
was repelled from her mind still brought a smile to her lips—he definitely had not been expecting
that.

But his final words had killed much of her confidence. Rationally, she knew that had been his intent.
He wanted her off balance, constantly wondering what he would do next. That was why he’d left
them alone for two weeks, after all.

*Rose? What’s wrong?* the Doctor asked, just as a guard pushed open her door to give her dinner.

She took the tray and sat down at the table to eat. *The Master still has more tricks up his sleeve,* she
told him. *I just have a feeling he’s gonna find a way to use the bond against us.*

*Not possible,* the Doctor said firmly. *He might be able to exploit the nature of the bond, to a certain
extent, but the only way he can truly use it against us is if we let him get to us enough to wish we
didn’t have it.*

She felt his tender touch and shuddered.

*No matter what happens, Rose, I will never regret this.*

*Neither will I, Doctor,* she promised immediately.

She hesitated before telling him the rest of what was on her mind, but she couldn’t bring herself to
hold back from him when this was the only communication they had.

*What is it, love?*

She sighed and tried to burrow closer to his mind. *I just… I miss you,* she told him. *I wish I could see
you, just for a moment.*

Rose felt the fleeting sensation of his fingers brushing her hair back from her face, and she blessed
the bond. Being able to touch her Doctor like this, even when they were in different parts of the ship,
was the one thing that was keeping her sane.

*Do you still have your coat?* he asked a moment later.

Rose blinked and looked at the lightweight black jacket she’d been wearing when they’d arrived on
the Valiant. *Yeah, why?*

*Because I might have tucked one of the pictures from our anniversary into the inside pocket.*

Rose grabbed her jacket and shoved her hand into the inside pocket. Her fingers brushed against the
stiff corner of a photograph. *You’re brilliant,* she told him as she pulled it out.

*I don’t even know why I did it,* he admitted, *except that I wanted to have one with me, so I thought
you should have one too.*

*How did you know this was my favourite?* Rose asked as she stared at the picture of the two of them
standing in front of the waterfall.

*The smile on your face when you saw it the first time. I bet you’re smiling like that again.*

*Which one do you have?*

A moment later, he showed her the picture he’d taken of her at sunset on their last evening, as they
sat on the beach again. Rose sighed; seeing the carefree, happy smile on her face almost hurt.

_You know, we still haven’t gone back to 1969 and taken care of things there, she pointed out. Maybe when this is all done, we can do that—and maybe we can go back to the Isle of Wight while we’re there._

_Whatever you want, love._

The guard returned for the empty tray, and Rose picked up a book and pretended to read while she and the Doctor kept talking. Finally, the lights dimmed and she took her pyjamas into the lavatory to change, then lay down in bed and waited for the Doctor’s signal that he was ready.

At his gentle telepathic tug, Rose closed her eyes and sank into the bond. She wasn’t tired yet, so she subtly directed their connection, and a moment later, they were curled up together on the sofa in the study.

Looking up at the Doctor, Rose could see the concern and frustration he tried to keep hidden. _Of course I’m worried_, he told her in response to her surprise. _The Master is as clever as I am, and he has a lifetime of experience, finding exactly the right buttons to push to get a reaction out of me. I won’t let him use our relationship as a weapon against us, but that doesn’t mean I’m looking forward to him trying._

They sat in silence for several long minutes, both of them struggling to keep their imaginations from running away with them.

Rose bit her lip and looked up at the Doctor. _How long are you going to stay with me?_

He blinked when she asked the question that had always come from him, but he answered without hesitation. _Forever_, he promised her. Rose felt tears trembling on her eyelashes, and he brushed them away with his thumbs before leaning in to kiss her. _I made my choice a long time ago, he told her as his lips moved tenderly against hers, and I am never going to leave you._

_oOoOoOoOo_

Three weeks into her year of travelling, Martha already wondered how she was going to make it. She rearranged her pack and wrapped her coat around herself. She’d managed to slip into the cargo hold of a container ship bound for France, but it wasn’t exactly luxury accommodations.

Her thoughts drifted automatically to her family and friends on board the Valiant, currently living in captivity. Her mum had looked so distraught the last time Martha had seen her, so apologetic for the very small role she’d played in the situation.

Between that apologetic look and her dad’s words about not sacrificing one daughter for the other, Martha figured Saxon must have taken Tish a few days before the election. Then he’d put pressure on her mum to get Martha to come home and bring the Doctor. That was why she’d invited them around for tea, wasn’t it?

Martha didn’t blame her for any of it. How could her mum have defied the Master when he had Tish? She tried not to think about how her big sister had been with the Master while Martha had been living months at a time in the past.

A loud bang startled her, and she clutched her key and shrunk further into the shadows. Until a few days ago, she’d believed the key to be the perfect protection. Then a little girl had seen her sparkly earrings, and members of the Master’s Unified Containment Forces had nearly found her.
She held her breath until the sailor returned topside. The leader of that UCF team had been so determined to catch her. He’d nearly caught up to her just before she slipped onto this ship, and Martha had a feeling she’d be seeing his scarred face in her sleep.

“Why are the Toclafane?”

“Do you know who the Master is?”

“Why is he doing this? Do you know how to stop him?”

Martha looked at the French refugees surrounding her. Tired faces, disheveled hair, and clothes that were starting to show wear told the same story she’d seen in England before crossing the Channel a week ago. Those the Master couldn’t subjugate or coerce to work for him, he was going to kill slowly by starvation and breaking their spirit.

But she remembered how she’d found this group—in the middle of an illegal flash market, organised by the refugees to make sure food and supplies kept getting to the people who needed them. The Doctor had called humans indomitable, and she was beginning to understand what he meant.

She took a deep breath and gathered her thoughts. “I don’t know how to stop the Master, but I know someone who does.” A few people leaned closer, and she made eye contact with them. “My friend—a man called the Doctor.”

“The Doctor?” Several of the refugees edged away from her. “Is he like the Master, then?”

Martha shook her head. “They’re both from the same planet, but the Doctor would never do what the Master has done. Think about it—don’t their names tell you how different they are?” she said, and some of the scepticism lifted. “The Doctor and Rose, they help people.”

“Then where are they?”

“Right now, they’re on the Valiant with the Master. But the Doctor promises he can help!” she added hurriedly. “Let me tell you about the day I met him, and then you’ll understand what he’s capable of.”

And she launched into a story of Judoon and a hospital on the moon. Several people nodded, and she remembered that had happened barely a month ago, in linear time.

“So the Judoon were looking for this alien called a plasmavore,” she explained. “Only, she hid herself by assimilating enough human blood to scan as human when they scanned her. And the Doctor, he figured out what she’d done, so he tricked her into drinking his blood. Because what she didn’t know was that the Doctor wasn’t human, either.”

A month ago, she might have hesitated to tell a story featuring blood-sucking in a crowd that included children. But they’d all seen enough since the Master had taken over to inure them to the gore.

“Wasn’t that dangerous?” one teenage boy asked.

She nodded. “Oh, yeah. And Rose wasn’t happy with him for doing it. But that’s who the Doctor is. He was willing to put his own life on the line to save everyone on this planet, and he has done so over and over and over again.”
Martha looked around at her audience. “So when I tell you that he knows how to take care of the Master and that you just need to trust him, I promise—you really can trust him.”

“How can we show him we trust him?” a woman asked. “How can we let him know?”

A smile crossed Martha’s face. “Just think his name.”

The French refugees looked at each other, then at Martha. “Think his name?” one asked dubiously.

“That’s right. At 9:00 on the morning of May 15, 2009, all of you think, ‘Doctor.’ That’s what he’s asked us to do.”

Their faces fell. “That’s almost a year away.”

“Hey,” Martha said, trying to mimic Rose’s encouraging voice. “It’s not going to be fast, and it won’t be easy, but we can beat the Master. We just have to believe, okay?”

Her gaze swept over the crowd, trying to catch the eye of as many people as possible. Finally, a few of them started nodding, and then more joined in.

“Thank you, Martha Jones.”

The Master tired of his attempts to break through their joined mental shields after only a few weeks, but the Doctor knew him too well to assume he had truly dropped the subject. So when the Master sauntered into his room, three months into their stay on the Valiant, looking more satisfied with himself than usual, the Doctor tensed.

“Do you know, Doctor,” he said as he leaned casually against the table, “I’ve been thinking about other interesting side effects of this bond of yours.”

The Doctor tried to maintain a poker face, but he knew his back had stiffened. The Master laughed and shook his head. “You always were rubbish at hiding those emotions, Doctor,” he chided. “How human of you.”

Questions were on the tip of the Doctor’s tongue—what was he planning, where was Rose, and more—but he swallowed them back and made the Master volunteer the information on his own. A frown flitted across the other Time Lord’s face, and the Doctor had to hide a triumphant smile.

“Aren’t you going to ask?”

The Doctor looked up at the Master, affecting boredom. “You’re going to tell me, whether I ask or not.”

The Master clucked his tongue. “You used to be more curious than this. I’m disappointed, Doctor… but that’s enough invitation for me.” He pulled his laser screwdriver out of his pocket and tossed it in the air, catching it as it came back down. “You see, it occurs to me that a complete marriage bond allows for the easy transference of all feelings.”

He twisted the controls on the screwdriver—the Doctor assumed to adjust the wavelength of the laser—then pointed it at a shiny spot on the wall. The wall opened up to reveal a television.

“CCTV,” he said helpfully. “And I think this is the channel… this remote is impossible to use… Oh,
there we have it.”

The screen flicked to life, and the Doctor straightened when he saw his bond mate for the first time in three months. Her grey track suit looked more like something her mother would wear, but she seemed healthy, and he breathed out a sigh of relief.

“Oh, I wouldn’t relax just yet,” the Master warned.

The Doctor went over what the Master had said since he’d entered the room, and he ground his teeth together. “Don’t,” he bit out, even though he knew exactly the reaction begging was likely to receive.

And sure enough, the Master’s sadistic grin spread across his face. He pulled a comm device out of his pocket and raised it to his mouth. “Go ahead.”

The door to Rose’s room opened, and he could tell she didn’t understand what was going to happen. Rose! Rose, be careful, he begged when the guard grabbed her.

The Master had the sound muted and the Doctor turned away from the screen, but he didn’t need to see or hear to know what was happening to her. He felt it when the first blow landed across her jaw, and he bit down on his tongue to keep himself from crying out as she was systematically beaten.

By the time it stopped, he could taste the iron tang of blood in his mouth and he hated the Master more than he ever had before.

He didn’t know when he’d closed his eyes, but he opened them now. The Master was looking at him with obvious glee and curiosity.

“Oh, that was fun,” he breathed out. “Do you know, Doctor, you flinched with every blow.”

“Torture, Master?” the Doctor said through gritted teeth. “I thought physical abuse was beneath you. You’ve spent too much time with humans lately.”

The smile disappeared from the Master’s face. “You’re one to talk,” he sniped. “Where’s the control a Time Lord should have over his emotions? I’ve managed to completely wreck your composure, simply by allowing a guard to strike your bond mate a few times.”

The Doctor’s lips pulled back in a silent snarl. It was more than a few times, and they both knew it.

“So you tell me—who’s acting more human? Me, or you?”

Rose curled up gingerly in bed. After the beating, a nurse had been sent into her room to bandage her up. She’d been torn between surprise that the Master had been so solicitous, and disgust that someone in the medical profession could look at her wounds without flinching. She’d held the man’s gaze, daring him to offer some kind of apology, but the coldness in his eyes told her none would be forthcoming.

The Doctor had lingered in her mind, not deepening the bond, but offering what support he could from a distance. He’d explained the wariness and desire for privacy that led him to wait until after lights out to take the bond to its deepest level, but as the hours ticked slowly by, Rose wished he would make an exception today.

Instead, she’d retrieved the picture of them standing together in front of the waterfall. It was a
bittersweet memory, but she clung to the hope that they could be like that again.

As soon as the lights went out, he was there, cradling her close. Rose, oh, I am so sorry, love.

_NOT your fault_, she told him.

_I will always regret you being hurt, whether I’m to blame or not_, he corrected gently. He hesitated for a moment, then asked, _Can I… would you show me?_

Rose had been struggling to keep her telepathic visage from showing the marks the guard had left on her body. _Why?_ she asked, unwilling to let the facade drop.

_Because you don’t need to hide anything from me._

Tears welled up in Rose’s eyes, and she let him see. His hands ghosted over each bruise, and then, finally, he pressed a kiss to her forehead.

_My precious Rose_, he whispered. _I am so, so sorry._

Rose sniffed. _Well, he said he’d find a way to use the bond against us._

The Doctor placed a finger under her chin and gently tipped her head back until he could look her in the eye. _Rose Tyler, I told you once that would be impossible._

Rose finally let the Doctor see her own guilt. _But… I know he only hurt me today because he wanted to see how you would react._

_That, and because he wanted you to feel guilty_, the Doctor explained. _The Master is an expert at manipulation, and I hate him for using you like this. But I told you he would only be successful in using the bond against us if we came to regret having it, and… well I have to tell you, right now I’m grateful we’re bonded._

_What? Why?_

He smiled down at her. _Because he would have hurt you, regardless. And since we have the bond, I can comfort you, even though we’re on opposite sides of the ship._

He cradled her face gently and pressed a soft kiss to her lips. _The truth is, love, the Master keeps thinking he’ll find a way to turn our bond into a weakness, but having you with me will always give me strength._
The Wolf is Silenced

Chapter Notes

Martha's activity is still based on the book.

Major angst warning for this chapter. I have virtual ice cream and cat cuddles for you when you're done.

Also, I posted a prequel to this 'verse over the weekend. It shows Nine pulling the timelines just before his regeneration to make this timeline possible. Still completely canon (we don't know what he did when he had the Vortex), but it fills in a blank.

Jack woke up in his bunk with the all-too-familiar ache that accompanied another resurrection. In the four months he’d been on the Valiant, he’d died as many times as he had in the 150 years beforehand. The Master took particular pleasure in keeping him on the edge of death just long enough for the pain to become unbearable before he allowed him to die.

He stretched his limbs carefully, groaning when he felt the pull of new skin across his shoulder. That's right. He burned me first this time.

“Sit up, Harkness,” a guard ordered, his voice sharp.

Jack grunted and pushed himself upright. “And hello to you too, Greg,” he said, giving the guard a flirty wink. Greg rolled his eyes, but both men knew the entire exchange was an act.

They’d been on the Valiant for two months when Greg had become Jack’s primary guard. He’d treated Jack exactly like all the other guards, so Jack had been surprised when he’d used an old World War II code to tell him he was a member of the Underground.

Since then, Jack had learned of eight more guards on board the Valiant who were members of the underground resistance. With their help, he’d started a system of passing messages throughout the ship to the other prisoners—well, at least to the Jones family. So far, none of the double agents had interacted with either the Doctor or Rose.

“I don’t have time for your games today, Captain,” Greg bit out. “Our Master has asked me to take lunch to Miss Tyler when we’re done here, so if you wouldn’t mind hurrying up…”

Jack knew his eyes had widened, but he was able to control every other jubilant response. He winked again at the guard. “Anything for you, Greg.”

The Master sat up straight when Dexter entered the flight deck. “I hope you have good news for me. It’s been four months, and so far, the team you chose to collect Martha Jones has done nothing.”

“The refugees and resistance have been surprisingly well-organised,” Dexter admitted. “We didn’t take their greater knowledge of local terrain into account—over and over, it’s been that advantage of local hideouts that has enabled them to elude us.”
He drummed his fingers on the table. “Please tell me this explanation is just a prelude to the announcement that you know where Martha Jones will be.”

Dexter smiled. “Yes, sir. It is. She’s meeting a high-ranking member of the Eastern Underground tonight at Cursus Hill in Turkey.”

The Master leaned forward on the table, his fingers steepled in front of him. “Martha Jones and the Eastern Underground? And Christmas is still two months away.”

_ooOooOoOoOo_

After four months of travelling mostly by foot, the speed of the Chinook carrying Martha to Turkey was almost overwhelming. She watched the ground below the helicopter for a while before the sight made her dizzy.

When the Underground had found her and her French guide, Mathieu, they’d thought at first that they’d been caught by the Unified Containment Force. The spotlights, the amplified voice ordering them to stop—it was all straight out of one of Martha’s nightmares.

The Underground hadn’t initially shared her elation when she’d realised the truth. They had been understandably wary to trust a stranger, especially a stranger who’d been asking questions at all the refugee camps, trying to find them. But when she’d selflessly offered her first aid skills following a UCF ambush, they’d finally welcomed her into their inner circle.

With their help, she’d travelled across western Europe and into the former Soviet Union, carrying the Doctor’s message with her everywhere she went. As the months dragged on, the people she met were more battered and hopeless, and she loved to see their dead eyes come alive again when they realised this might not be the end for humanity after all.

Her mission wasn’t all sunshine and roses now that she had the Underground supporting her. Everywhere she went the big, scar-faced UCF agent dogged her steps. Underground members across Europe had deflected his attempts at capture time and again, putting themselves on the line for her. Somehow, though, Martha herself had stayed free. As she stared ahead towards Turkey, she only hoped that wouldn’t change.

_ooOooOoOoOo_

Two hours later, Martha was seated in the passenger seat of a convoy truck, listening to Brigadier Erik Calvin of UNIT explain the fast one they’d just pulled on the UCF.

“There is no Cursus Hill, actually,” he told her. “It’s disinformation. Cursus Hill isn’t a geographical location; it’s just the code name we give to a meet point. We decide where Cursus Hill is going to be, depending on the nature of the operation.”

“I see,” Martha said. A faint smile crossed her face when she thought about how angry the scarred UCF agent must have been when he got to what he thought was Cursus Hill and she wasn’t there.

“You are a high-value target, Miss Jones,” Calvin said. “To our certain knowledge, quite apart from their general security echelons, they have at least three dedicated kill-squads hunting for you. One in particular was closing in on your heels in Istanbul, so we had to play things close to the chest. We’ve changed the location of Cursus Hill four times in the last twenty hours. I imagine the UCF will be cursing your name right about now.”

Martha grinned. “Oh, I’m sure they are,” she agreed. “Their Master won’t be too pleased with them, either.”
The Brigadier shot her a sideways glance. “Speaking of the Master… Miss Jones, I have to ask. You must know. How do we do it?”

A hole opened in the pit of Martha’s stomach, as it always did when she could tell people expected her to know the answer to something she was clueless about. “How do we do what?”

“How do we kill a Time Lord?”

She jerked her head around and stared at him. “Is that what people think I’m doing?” she asked. “Travelling the Earth, looking for a way to kill the Master?”

“Why else would the Doctor send you on this mission?” Calvin countered.

Martha stared at him. “When you introduced yourself, you told me your father knew the Doctor when he worked for UNIT. Did he ever tell you any stories that suggested the Doctor would send his friends on a quest looking for a weapon?”

The tips of his ears turned red. “No,” he admitted. “Look, we’re almost to our base. Let’s wait until we can sit down with some tea and biscuits, and you can tell me what your actual plan is.”

“Oh, I haven’t had biscuits in three months,” Martha said, already feeling the way they would crumble on her tongue.

The Brigadier smiled proudly. “We’ve managed to keep some essential supplies on hand.”

The notion that tea and biccies were essential supplies was so British, homesickness hit Martha like a punch in the gut. She took a deep breath and stared out the window, determined not to let this military man see her crying over McVitie’s.

Thirty minutes later, they were sitting on opposite sides of a desk in a cramped office, a plate of chocolate biscuits between them and each with tea in hand. Martha raised her cup to her nose and breathed deeply, taking in the comforting aroma.

“God, this feels good,” she muttered after she took the first sip.

“We strive for a glimmer of civility here in Turkey,” Calvin said.

“Well, you’ve managed it.”

He took a sip of his own tea, then set the cup down. “You really don’t know how it can be done?”

Martha sighed and wrapped her hands around her cup. It was cold in Turkey. “I really don’t. I’m sorry.”

He shrugged and leaned back in his chair. “Damn shame.”

“Even if I knew how to kill him once—which I suppose could be done in most ways that could kill humans—Time Lords don’t die when they’re mortally wounded. They regenerate.”

He scowled. “Yes, frightfully hard to dispose of, that’s what I’d heard.”

Martha ate a biscuit while she considered the brigadier’s misconception. “But you thought I’d know how?”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “I thought the Doctor had told you some secret, maybe about an alien weapon that was scattered in pieces around the globe. An alien weapon that has the power to
kill a Time Lord stone dead, without that regeneration nonsense.”

“That’s not the Doctor’s way,” Martha said slowly, her mind processing what Calvin had suggested. “He has a plan to stop the Master, but he’s not going to do it by killing him.” She tapped her chin. “But… it might not hurt if that’s what the Master thinks I’m doing. He’d be more likely to believe I’m walking the Earth looking for some mythical anti-regeneration weapon than the truth—so let him.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Because it would fit with his notions of what the human race is,” she told him. “He treats us with violence and oppression because he expects us to resist with violence. The Master has a low opinion of our species, Brigadier.”

“That much, Miss Jones, is obvious.”

Martha nodded decisively. “So let’s give him a red herring to follow. If he thinks I’m looking for a weapon, he won’t wonder why I’m travelling the Earth. And if he doesn’t wonder, it won’t occur to him to question why I’m talking to people in every refugee camp I visit, telling them about the Doctor.”

She fixed the Brigadier with a look. “Because in the end, that’s what’s going to save humanity. Not a gun, not a missile—just hope, and a name. The Doctor can stop the Master. He has a plan, Brigadier. But he needs us to help.”

“What can I do?”

Martha smiled and leaned back in her chair. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Rose rolled her eyes when Greg delivered her dinner again. Most of the guards left her alone, but Greg was chatty.

“Hello, Rose!”

She scowled as she took the tray from him and sat down at the table. That was the other thing she hated about Greg. He acted like they were best mates, and nothing she’d said got him to stop.

He sat down opposite her, and Rose blinked twice. That was new. “Your kind usually just lurk over there in the doorway.” She pointed with her fork.

Greg pulled something small out of his pocket, which she recognised a moment later as an iPod. “My kind?” he said as he fiddled with the controls. “Is that really the kind of attitude your Doctor teaches you to have towards people different from you? For shame, Rose Tyler.”

Rose stabbed at the meat, making the fork click hard on the plate. “The Doctor doesn’t usually mind if I don’t fraternise with the enemy.”

He laughed. “Fraternise with the enemy? And here I was going to offer some dinner music. The Master modified this iPod to play remotely via the mini speakers in the wall around your television. I wonder when Apple will come up with that.” He pressed play, and Glenn Miller’s “Moonlight Serenade” filled the room. “You know what this song makes me think of? Dancing with a pretty girl in the middle of an air raid, not caring if the bombs fall all around us.”
Rose took a bite and chewed slowly as she considered what he’d just said. That was almost point by point a description of how she’d met Jack.

“Yeah, but you’d want to be near some kind of monument, wouldn’t you?” she tested. “Just to sorta… set the mood?”

Greg leaned back in his chair and nodded. “Big Ben. Can you picture it? World War II, the bombs are falling, and I’ve just rescued a pretty girl. Now I need to get her to dance with me.”

Rose snorted. “That sounds like Captain Jack,” she said. “Always a smooth one with the ladies—drives the Doctor spare.”

She kept her tone mocking, but tapped her finger on the table to indicate she’d understood the message. Jack had sent Greg, which meant he could be trusted.

Greg smirked, and Rose reminded herself that he had to appear to be a normal guard. “I can understand that,” he said, winking at Rose. “If I had a gorgeous wife like you, I wouldn’t want other men chatting her up either.”

He leaned forward on the table. “I bet he likes the fact that hardly anyone on the Valiant has ever seen you. The Master brings the Doctor to the flight deck occasionally, and Jack… well, everyone knows Jack. But you, Rose Tyler—you’re a ghost. Some people who weren’t on board at the beginning swear you don’t even exist.”

His voice was mocking, but Rose saw the warning in his eyes and a chill went down her spine. She’d wondered, off and on, if any of the other prisoners got to leave their cells. Here was her answer.

The Master was trying to get people to forget her, but why?

oOoOoOoOo

Martha stared at the crowd of prisoners, trying to remember how exactly she’d gotten here. Her journey hadn’t been without incident since leaving Turkey, but even when she saw the rocket shipyard stretching across Russia, she hadn’t imagined she’d end up in a labour camp in Japan.

And yet, here she was. Aka Labour Camp. Things had gone wrong from the moment she’d set foot in Japan. First, her contact hadn’t shown, and then, the perception filter had truly failed for the first time. It was almost as if… almost as if there was something in Japan blocking the signal from Archangel.

But she could think about that later. Tonight was her night to tell stories of the Doctor. Her friends Hito and Ono had brought a group of slaves to listen to her message of hope.

Hope. Martha laughed. How could she offer hope when she was just as trapped as they were?

She drew a deep breath and told a story about a whole planet of people who’d been trapped, stuck on the motorway with no way out. Leaving out the fact that his primary focus had been finding Rose, she wove a story of a man who leapt from car to car in order to save a doomed population.

“And when it was over,” she said, “when the motorway opened up and all those people flew into the sky, the Doctor’s friend looked at him and he said one more thing. You are not alone.”

She suppressed a shudder that went down her spine at the words they now knew referred to the Master and plastered a smile on her face.
“That’s what we have to remember right now,” she encouraged the Japanese prisoners. “It feels like we’re all alone, especially here in the labour camp. But we’re not. Every other person on Earth is looking for hope, just as much as you are. And if all of us together will do as the Doctor asks…”

“What does he want?” a woman asked.

Martha turned and smiled at her. “Just say his name. Say his name on May 15 at 4:00 in the afternoon. Then the Doctor will know that he isn’t alone, that we’re all with him. That’s when he’ll be able to stop the Master.”

When the Doctor stepped onto the flight deck, the manic energy in the room made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. “What are you doing?” he asked the Master, without preamble.

His old friend spun on his heels, a wide smile on his face. “I have an idea,” he said, “but first, tell me about it, Doctor. Tell me what it was like at the end of the war.”

The Doctor sat down at the conference table and clenched his fists where the Master couldn’t see them. “Why do you care?” he asked, his voice flat. “You weren’t there. You ran.”

“A sibilant curse escaped the Doctor, but the Master just laughed. “It’s almost too easy, how I can get you to do what I want simply by threatening her. Still, if it works…” A trace of steel entered his voice. “Tell me, Doctor.”

And so the Doctor told him about the fall of Arcadia, and the day when he’d finally realised someone needed to say, “No more.” The Time War was ripping the universe apart, and if he had to destroy a galaxy to save a universe, well, the greater good would balance it out.

He told him about stealing the Moment—the Master had laughed when he’d mentioned breaking into the archives. Some of the details were fuzzy after that, due to the trauma left by both the act and his own regeneration.

“Hmmm…” The Master tapped his finger against his chin. “Do you know what my own paradox is doing to Time?” he asked.

The Doctor gritted his teeth. His head throbbed every time he tried to look at timelines. “Of course I do.”

“Well, this kind of damage breaks down the time lock around the War,” the Master said. “So if I were to take handsome Jack’s Vortex manipulator once we find Martha, I could, conceivably, undo everything you did.”

“You can’t do that,” the Doctor ground out. “The paradox would be more massive than even the TARDIS could support. If Gallifrey came back, then the whole universe would have to die in its place.”

The Master’s eyes flashed. “Sometimes, your answers are tedious, Doctor. You fail to grasp that as the superior race, we have that right.”

Horror and anger warred within the Doctor. That was exactly the conclusion the High Council had come to at the end of the War. The Doctor had not been privy to their conversations, but he knew Rassilon well enough to know what he would suggest. Let Gallifrey survive, at the cost of the
universe, and then the Time Lords would evolve into beings existing on a higher plane.

When the Doctor remained quiet, the Master sighed and waved at the door. “Take him back to his room, Greg.”

In all her running from the UCF, Martha had never dreamed that when she came face-to-face with the scarred agent, he would be a prisoner himself. In fact, at first she’d thought he’d found her.

When Griffin told her the story of the runaround he’d gotten when he’d tried to tell his higher-ups that Martha Jones was going to Japan, she listened. There was something off about that story, just like there had been something off when her contact had disappeared and her perception filter stopped working.

All of the information pointed to one obvious conclusion: someone else was in control of Japan. Someone who had done a very good job of letting the Master think he was in charge, while at the same time removing every tool he used to control the Earth.

But who?

As their time on the Valiant neared the six month mark, a few important dates cropped up. They obviously couldn’t go anywhere to celebrate, so instead, the Doctor set out to create a new mental space for them. It was easy to create the illusion of a familiar place within their bond, but taking her somewhere new would require more work. He spent almost a week thinking about every detail of the setting so it would feel real when he brought her here.

It was all worth it when the lights went out and Rose joined him in the Alpine chalet he had created for her. She turned a slow circle in the middle of the living room, taking in the Christmas tree that stood beside the roaring fire.

It’s Christmas, then?

In a few weeks, he told her. But I wanted to show you this tonight, because the holiday isn’t the only thing we have to celebrate.

Rose’s forehead wrinkled adorably as she tried to work out what he meant. He kissed the furrow away, then smiled at her.

We’ve been properly together for two years now.

She smiled and slid her hands over his chest, linking them loosely behind his neck. We didn’t celebrate that anniversary last year.

The Doctor bumped his nose against hers. It’s hard to keep track of all of them when we’re jumping around in time.

True, she agreed. So. She looked up at him through her eyelashes. Would that be two years since you told me you loved me, since our first date, or since I promised you forever?

He chuckled and pressed a quick kiss to her lips. Since I couldn’t bring myself to face the Devil without letting you know how much I loved you first.
The melancholy that washed over her surprised him. *Oh, I loved that moment,* she assured him. *But it scared me too—it always does when you say you love me in the middle of a dangerous situation.*

She turned away and looked out the window, and the Doctor watched her for a moment, observing the snow falling. Then he slowly walked up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist.

**Would you rather I didn’t?**

Rose tilted her head back so she could see him. *Oh no. It’s just that jolt of fear when I know you aren’t sure we’re gonna get out of something… but you’re right. If the worst happened, I’d cherish hearing those words one more time.*

He hummed and brushed a kiss against her temple.

*Hang on, Rose said. So if today is our dating anniversary—*

The Doctor cleared his throat. *It was a few days ago, actually. It took a little more work to pull this off than I anticipated.*

She blinked. *Right. But that means that next week, it’ll have been two years since I first promised to stay with you forever.*

His eyes widened, and Rose loved that she had actually managed to surprise him with an anniversary for once. *Two years since we first bonded,* he said, a hint of awe in his voice. *Any regrets?*

*None,* she told him firmly. *I might not have known this kind of relationship was possible when I was a kid, but I wouldn’t trade it for a typical human marriage in a million years.*

A draught blew in through the window, and Rose shivered.

*Lets sit in front of the fireplace,* the Doctor suggested. He took the spot in the corner of the couch and patted the cushion next to him.

Instead of sitting down beside him, Rose stretched out on the couch and rested her head in his lap. The Doctor smiled down at her and started playing with her hair.

**What do you want to do when we’re done here?**

She bit her lip. By “done here,” he meant once they’d taken care of the Master. They hadn’t talked much about what came next, probably because they both struggled to remain hopeful that they’d win.

*Well, I already told you I want to go back to the Isle of Wight.*

*Right. We need to park the TARDIS in 1969 for a month so you can enjoy the second half of our stay there.*

*Yes, please!* Rose wrinkled her nose. *I wish we could go back to the beginning of our time there and just change our past a little bit, but I suppose that wouldn’t be smart.*

*Not really. And we learned some important things in that month, so it really wouldn’t be wise to erase it.*

*Fine.*

The Doctor chuckled at the begrudging way she dragged out the word, then managed to shift them
so he was stretched out beside her. Rose rested her head on his shoulder, still trying to think of places she wanted to go.

*Oh! You were gonna take me to the planet that pretty paint came from.*

*Ekbrilon,* the Doctor supplied. *There’s a restaurant with outdoor seating right on the water. Candlelight only, and the light reflects off the sand and the water.*

*Sounds gorgeous.* Rose sighed and cuddled closer to him. The more they talked about the things they wanted to do next, the more confident she felt that they’d have a next.

*We will, Rose. I promise you, we will get back home where we belong.*

Rose nodded. *I believe you, Doctor.*

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The Doctor looked around the flight deck, taking in the Christmas decorations. He’d known the holiday was coming up, but somehow the tree decked out in fairy lights and tinsel seemed out of place on the *Valiant.*

“I didn’t expect you to celebrate Earth holidays,” he said.

The Master sat down at the conference table. “Well, this one happens to be special. I arrived on Earth two years ago this month.”

The Doctor took the only other seat available. “I never asked you when exactly you arrived, after you pushed my TARDIS to give you extra time.”

“It was the week before Christmas, 2006. I watched the news coverage on the Sycorax ship, of course, and the downfall of Harriet Jones.” He leaned back in his chair. “That was what gave me the idea to go into politics, and look at me now.” He spread his hands out in front of him.

The Doctor clenched his jaw. It had already occurred to him that the Master had stepped into the power vacuum he’d created when he’d removed Harriet Jones from office. Though he stood by his belief that the former prime minister had made the wrong choice in killing the fleeing Sycorax, there was no doubt that she would be preferable to her successor. *At least Harriet Jones never showed signs of megalomania.*

“Of course,” the Master continued, “that was also when I discovered the existence of Torchwood. Because the weapon that shot down the Sycorax? That was far superior to anything humans should have for another hundred years. So I did some digging, and imagine my delight when I learned there was an entire agency on your favourite planet devoted to protecting Britain… from you.”

“Had the Void ship already arrived in this world when you first visited Torchwood?”

The Master shook his head. “That happened shortly after. They knew the weak spot was there, of course, since that’s why they built the tower in the first place.”

“Why didn’t you tell them what it was when it appeared?” the Doctor asked.

“Because, Doctor, there is a difference between advanced information a human might possess, and the kind of information that makes Torchwood suspect you’re an alien. I realise subtlety isn’t exactly your thing, but surely even you can understand that.”
The Doctor raised an eyebrow. “Are you really going to lecture me on being subtle, Master? Have you forgotten the time you called yourself Dr. Harcourt De’ath?”

The Master’s nostrils flared, but after a moment, he continued with his story. “From then on, I became something of an advisor to Yvonne Hartman. I was the one who told her that if they fired particle beams at the breach, it would open long enough for them to harness the radiation from the Void into electricity.”

The Doctor ground his teeth together. “You nearly destroyed two universes.”

The Master waved his hand dismissively. “But I knew it would be fine, because I’d already seen you at the end of the universe.”

Another thought occurred to the Doctor. “You saw Rose, too, and yet you tried to trap her in the parallel world. You were willing to create a paradox, just to ruin my life.”

“Oh, but Doctor, don’t you know?” The Master pressed his hands to the table. “Your tragic separation from Rose Tyler was the prime timeline. I could feel events pulling in that direction from the moment I arrived in 2006.” He shook his head. “Then something happened in the first few months of 2007, and timelines began to change around you. All I did was attempt to pull things back to the original course of events.”

The Doctor stilled. He hadn’t known, but if the timeframe the Master gave was accurate, he could guess what had changed their future. The TARDIS had saved Rose, but she’d only been able to do so because of her bond with Rose. If he hadn’t woken up Rose’s telepathy…

“You still tried to change events you knew had happened,” he pointed out.

For a moment, the Master’s smug grin slipped. “Yes, and your ship interfered,” he spat out. “Time would have compensated for Rose Tyler’s loss in this universe.”

The Doctor knew the Master was right. Hadn’t they seen echoes of that timeline more than once in the year after Canary Wharf? He swallowed hard and adjusted his tie as he looked for a new topic of conversation. The thought that time would have marched on, uncaring of the fact that he’d lost Rose, made him nervous.

He tried to catch a glimpse of their timelines—some kind of reassurance that this year would end well would be nice. But the paradox clouded everything, and all he could see was the wrongness of the present.

“So, it’s Christmas,” he said after a moment. “Do you know what you’re getting?”

The Master chuckled and spread his hands out in front of him. “I already have everything I want.”

The Doctor rolled his eyes. Sometimes, the Master’s insolent conceit was overdone. “This can’t be all you want, Master.”

The door slid open and Francine entered, pushing a tea cart. The Master hopped to his feet and poured for both of them, adding milk and sugar to the Doctor’s cup before bringing the tea back to the table.

“Oh, but it is, Doctor,” he said after he sat back down. “I have the Earth to command and you under my control. What more could I ask for?”

The doors opened again, and Dexter walked in and offered a sharp salute. “Sir.”
The Master leaned back in his chair and smiled at her, then looked at the Doctor. “See? A gorgeous young lady in uniform—one of the perks of power. Why would I want anything else?” Anger suffused the Doctor’s face, and the Master rolled his eyes. Had the Doctor always been this boring? Weren’t renegades supposed to push the boundaries of rules and the law? Wasn’t that part of the definition?

“What a seat, Dexter.” He poured a cup of tea and slid it over to her, then said, “And please keep ‘sir’-ing me like that. If you do it often enough, I’ll promote you to queen.” He tapped his chin. “There must be somewhere that needs a queen. I’ll look into it.”

She sipped her tea and didn’t smile.

“You aren’t smiling,” he said. “That means something has happened. What have you got for me?” he asked. “Not all bad news, I hope?”

Dexter pushed a strand of straight blonde hair back over her ear. “Some bad news, I’m afraid, sir.”

This time, the sir didn’t thrill him the way it had a moment ago. “Oh dear. Not another food riot in Brazil. I hate it when that happens.”

Her eyes flickered over to the Doctor. “No, sir.”

The Master waved his hand. “You can say whatever you like in front of the Doctor. It’s not like he can use any information he gains against us.”

His ADC pursed her lips, and her obvious disapproval pleased the Master. It meant she took security seriously. But… “I insist.”

Dexter set her teacup down carefully and looked directly at him. “There’s been an incident in Honshu.”

The Master sat up straight. “Honshu? Japanese Honshu? I don’t like the sound of that. I’ve got a lot of interests in Honshu.” He pointed to the report she held. “Show me.”

She handed it over, and he sped-read through it. “The whole zone?” he asked when he grasped what it was telling him. “The whole zone, all of the guidance plants?”

“Yes, sir. Power has been down for sixty-four minutes, sir.”

The Master took a deep breath and scratched his forehead. “I’m really going to be obliged to kill someone about this,” he said, enjoying the sharp disapproval he could sense from the Doctor at that declaration.

“I’m certain you are, sir,” she told him. “There is another factor for your consideration.” She handed him another sheet of paper. “Transcript of a phone conversation I took thirty minutes ago. I thought you’d want to see it.”

The Master’s eyes widened when he got to the useful bit of information. “The Drast? The Drast? Here?” he said. “Those fortune-hunting, glowy-glowy, entrepreneuring nobodies? The Drast?” he spat out, spinning to look at the Doctor. “Did you know anything about this?”

But for once, the Doctor looked clueless instead of smug. The Master sighed; at least this wasn’t some part of his plan.

“Still, the Drast?” he said yet again. He leaned back in his chair and debated all the options. “I’ll
teach the Drast to mess with me,” he decided. “Bioluminescent idiots. And I was starting to like Japan so much.”

The ADC shifted in her seat, and the Master smirked. “Unless you teleport to Japan in the next hour, you don’t have anything to worry about. Summon the Toclafane swarms. I want the Drast to know, without any qualification, who’s Master.”

“Yes, sir.”

The Master pressed his lips into a thin line and considered. “Burn the islands,” he said finally. “Yes, burn them. We can build guidance somewhere else.”

“Yes, sir.” The ADC finished her tea, then stood, saluted, and left the room.

The Doctor’s hand were clenched around the edge of the table. “You’re going to destroy an entire country, just to prove a point to another race?”

The Master propped his feet up on the table and grinned at him.

“Oh, come on,” he cried. “Vengeance can be so much fun. And besides proving a point to the Drast, it’s annoyed you.”

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That evening, Rose was waiting for the Doctor. He’d told her around lunch time that the Master wanted to see him on the flight deck that afternoon. She’d rolled her eyes at the other Time Lord’s obvious fixation on the Doctor, but thought nothing more of it. Until she’d felt the rage coursing through the Doctor in the middle of the afternoon.

He’d deflected her questions, or maybe he’d been too angry to even notice them. At any rate, she had no idea what had made him so upset, but she could tell how close he was to losing hope. This was her turn to be the one who comforted, rather than the one needing comfort.

The Doctor was still tense when the lights went out, but he followed her telepathic summons without question. Rose had debated which room in the TARDIS would be most relaxing, and when the Doctor’s breath caught in his throat at the sight of the red grass, she knew she’d chosen well.

She held out a hand, and he took it readily. Come with me, love. She led him to the lone silver tree, standing as a sentinel on top of the hill. The red grass was surprisingly soft to sit in, and once she had herself situated with her back against the tree trunk, she invited him to lay down and put his head in her lap.

The Doctor stretched out on his side and draped an arm over Rose’s legs. He sighed when she started running her fingers through his hair, and she waited until most of the tension had left his body to ask.

What happened today?

He stiffened, then rolled over onto his back so he could look at her. The Master, he spat out. He discovered an alien race had already taken over Japan, so he burned the islands.

Rose’s fingers stopped moving. What do you mean, he burned the islands?

He sent a horde Toclafane in with orders to destroy the country. Kill everyone, burn down the
Her stomach turned at the image his words created. The entire country?

All of it. The Doctor scrubbed his hands over his face. Of all the Time Lords to survive, why did it have to be him?

Rose ran her fingers over his forehead, trying to massage the lines away. I wish I knew the answer to that, Doctor.

He sighed. Just five and a half months left. We can last that long, right?

Yeah, we can. Rose was a little surprised he didn’t feel guilty that his plan was taking so long, leaving the Earth to suffer for the year, but she wasn’t going to bring that up if he didn’t.

Instead, she tugged on his shoulder, and when he gave in to her silent request and sat up, she shifted so she was sitting between his legs. As the first sun slipped below the horizon, turning that portion of the sky pink and purple, Rose leaned her head back to rest on his shoulder.

The Doctor wrapped his arms around her waist and nuzzled into her neck, and Rose turned her head slightly to kiss him.

Feeling better? she asked after he pulled out of the kiss and leaned back against the tree.

He nodded, and his stubble brushed against her cheek. I’m so glad you’re here with me, Rose, he told her, and she knew without asking that he meant here, in this universe, not necessarily on the Valiant. I’m not sure… He cleared his throat. Having you to talk to every night is keeping me sane. This would have been so much harder to do without you.

Rose focused on the Doctor and how much she loved him, and a moment later, his arms tightened around her. Well, it’s a good thing I’m not going anywhere then.

The Doctor chuckled. A very good thing, he agreed.

You know what? She brought his hand to her lips and pressed a kiss to it. They keep trying to split us up, but they never ever will.

Celebrating their anniversaries and focusing on their future strengthened the hope of both Rose and the Doctor. Rose even found herself trying to reach out to the Master.

“You don’t have to do this,” she told him on Christmas Day, when he brought her a turkey dinner and a cracker. “You could just undo all of this—you know that if you turned off the paradox machine, everything would go back to the way it’s supposed to be.”

He raised an eyebrow. “And then do you imagine that UNIT would just let me go? I assassinated the President of the United States on live television.”

Rose shrugged. “But the Doctor could ask permission to have you travel with us. I know…” She bit her lip, then continued. “I know it hurts him to be the only one. I can be there for him in so many ways, but I don’t have the shared history the two of you have.”

The Master crossed his arms over his chest and looked down at her. “Even if I were willing to travel with you as some kind of pet, the drums won’t let me go.”
Excitement burned in Rose. It seemed like maybe… maybe he was considering it. If she could just
convince him to stop all of this, maybe they could go home now, instead of in five months.

“What if we could take care of that? Between the three of us, the Doctor, the TARDIS, and me, I bet
we could figure out why you have those drums in your head, and get them quiet.”

The Master stared at her. “What’s happened to you?” he asked finally. “Three weeks ago, you would
barely talk to me. Now you want me to travel with you, and you’re going to go into my head and
stop the sound that’s been tormenting me my entire life. Why?”

Rose twirled her fork. “Dunno,” she said. “Guess… it’s hope. Me and the Doctor, we know we’re
gonna get out of here. We’re going home, back to the TARDIS where we belong.” She looked up at
him. “It’s easy to be generous when you already have everything you want.”

He pressed his lips into a thin line, then stalked out of her room.

He didn’t come back for two weeks. Rose almost hoped he’d gotten annoyed enough with her to just
leave her alone, so when he walked into her room carrying a medium sized box, she was
disappointed.

“Do you know what I’ve realised, Miss Tyler?”

The Master’s nonchalant tone immediately put Rose on guard. “What?”

The Master turned on the CCTV screen, showing her the Doctor, sitting on his bed with his back
against the wall.

It had been so long since Rose had seen her Doctor that even this glimpse of him onscreen felt
heavenly. He questioned her happiness, and she said, Smile, Doctor—you’re on telly.

He looked straight at the camera and flashed her the smile he reserved for her. I wish I could see you,
too.

Nice suit, she observed. The suit jacket was slung over his chair, and he had his shirt sleeves rolled
up to his elbows and his tie hanging loose around his neck. She eyed the rumpled grey trousers. Of
course, it doesn’t fit quite as nicely as the brown and the blue…

“Oh, look at that,” the Master cooed. “You use that bond so effortlessly, don’t you?”

“Well, we’ve had it for two years. It does tend to become habit after a while.”

He hummed noncommittally. “I’ve explored so much of your bond with the Doctor, but no matter
what I do, I can’t break it.”

“You should have known enough about a Gallifreyan marriage bond to know they’re unbreakable,”
Rose told him.


“Can we skip the ‘previously on the Master and Rose’ bit and move on to today’s episode?” Rose
asked impatiently.

Amusement lit the Master’s eyes. “As I was saying, I’ve been unable to break your bond. Your
telepathic bond.”

He pulled a thin silver choker out of the box and attached it around Rose’s neck.
“Jewellery, Harry?” Rose asked. “I think my husband might get upset if I accept gifts like this from another man.”

“Your bond mate,” the Master said, irritation flashing in his eyes when she refused yet again to use the term in front of him, “won’t know any better. Not really.”

Rose straightened up and looked at the monitor. “What are you going to do to him?” she asked.

Concern flared over the bond. Rose tried to calm the Doctor with a promise that nothing was happening that was any worse than what she’d experienced so far, but that wasn’t a very reassuring thought.

“I don’t plan to do anything… to him.”

Rose wanted to hide her fear from the Doctor, but she knew he felt it. His own worry screamed at her over the bond, and she saw his hands clench into fists.

“As I was saying, I’ve discovered your bond is impossible to break. I can’t force him out of your mind, nor you out of his. But the bond makes you both stronger, and I really can’t have that.”

Despite the insolent tone she used to irritate the Master, Rose was becoming more scared by the minute. She looked at the television and tried to memorise every inch of the Doctor’s features.

I love you, she told him, hoping with every fibre of her being that this wouldn’t be her last chance to say it.

“What do you plan to do about it?” Rose asked.

The Master’s eyes glittered. “Oh, I was so hoping you would ask. Do you see this?” he asked, holding up a small remote. “This is the remote to the device I just placed on your neck—oh, and by the way, there’s an explosive wired into the latch, so don’t even think about taking it off, unless you want to lose your head.” He tilted his head. “I really don’t know if it’s possible to regenerate after being blown to bits.”

I love you, too, Rose.

Some of the tightness around her chest eased with the Doctor’s words, and she rolled her eyes at the Master. “And what does the blessed device do?” she asked. “You’re worse than all the villains on telly,” she told him matter-of-factly. “Nattering on about your plans, blah blah blah.”

“It’s a personal telepathic dampening field. And if I press this button—”

The Master pressed the red button, and Rose’s eyes slammed shut as pain seared through her mind. The bond was gone. Screams filled the room, but she ignored them as she frantically looked for the Doctor. She found the space where he should be in her mind, but instead of pulsing with the Doctor’s presence, it was dark—like a burned out lightbulb.

Her eyes flew to the CCTV to make sure the Doctor was still alive, and that was when she realised the diabolical genius of the Master’s plan. The Doctor was shouting and pounding on the walls, trying to get away from his prison. The sound was muted, but she could see him saying her name over and over.

He thought the Master had killed her.

Rose instinctively tried to reach for him, to reassure him that she was still here, and she moaned out
loud when that sent a fresh wave of pain through her skull. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of the Master's smirk, and she pressed her lips together. He wanted to break them both.

The Master chuckled. “Oh, this is even more fun than I thought it would be.”

“Go to hell,” Rose spat out. Her throat felt raw, and she realised the screams she’d heard earlier had been hers.

The Master raised his eyebrows. “I think I’ll leave this on for now.” He nodded to the television where the Doctor was now sitting on the floor with his back against the wall. “I wouldn’t want you to forget how much you’ve hurt your beloved bond mate.” He fiddled with the remote. “In fact…”

The Doctor’s voice filled the room, low moans of her name followed by whimpers of pain. He’d stopped shouting and pulled up his knees so he could hide his face and rock back and forth, but the quiet cries cut Rose to the quick.

“So perfect,” the Master said, reaching out to touch her collar. Rose slapped his hand, and he backed away from her with both hands held up. “My apologies if I crossed a line, Miss Tyler,” he said. “And now, I’ll leave you here to consider how your precious bond became your biggest weakness.”

He slipped out of the room, but Rose’s eyes were already fixed on the screen again. The Doctor shoved shaking hands through his hair, yanking on sections. Rose tried again to reach for him, and tears slipped down her cheeks when he still wasn’t there. Unable to watch any longer, she curled up on her side and sobbed into her pillow.
The Doctor wiped the tears from his eyes and stood up when his door slid open. He wasn’t naive enough to think the Master hadn’t been watching his response over CCTV, but he wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of seeing his agony in person. The clawing emptiness in his mind made him dizzy, but he managed to stand straight without leaning on the wall.

“How have you been this afternoon?” the Master asked as he sauntered into the room, a guard beside him.

The Doctor glared at him and spat out a string of curses in Gallifreyan that detailed exactly what he wanted the Master to do with himself and where he could go.

“What’s gotten you so riled up?” the Master said.

A hot flush swept over his body, and the Doctor lunged at the Master, trying to wrap his hands around his neck. The guard pulled out his truncheon and knocked the Doctor down.

He groaned and rolled over to sit with his back to the wall. “You’ll regret this, Master. I promise you, I won’t leave you alone until you regret what you did today.” He put his hand on his jaw, trying to rub out the bruise he could already feel forming.

“Oh, I see.” The Master chuckled. “This is about the lovely Rose, isn’t it? What did it feel like to lose your bond?”

Tears burned in his eyes, and the Doctor took a shaky breath, trying to hold them back. It felt like he’d been given a lobotomy—part of his mind was gone, and he felt off-balance telepathically in a way that matched his physical dizziness.

“I do regret that it was necessary for me to go to such lengths, but as I told your late wife, I simply couldn’t allow the two of you to continue drawing strength from each other.”

The words “late wife” hit the Doctor exactly as he knew the Master had intended for them to. He clenched his hands into fists, hoping to hide the shaking, but he couldn’t fight his physiological reaction to losing the bond any longer.

The Master’s voice droned on, but the Doctor couldn’t make out the words. His dizziness turned to vertigo, making the room spin around him, and he stumbled to his feet and staggered towards his bed. He was vaguely aware of the Master’s laughter, and then the sound of the door opening and closing, but his mind was shutting down so rapidly he barely made it to the bed before he collapsed.

The same neurotransmitter that had protected him from shock the first time his bond with Rose had broken flooded his system again. Despite her own pain, the TARDIS hummed weakly in the back of his mind, urging him to sleep. For once, the Doctor didn’t argue, and he faded into a dreamless rest.
When Rose woke up the next morning, the silence in her mind told her the previous day had not been a bad dream. The loss of the Doctor in her head had left her with a headache, and she groaned softly as she rubbed at her temple, trying to massage it away.

She pushed herself upright and leaned against the wall. The television was dark, and doubt and fear crept up on her. The Master could do anything to the Doctor, and she would never know. Logically, she knew the Master was too obsessed with the Doctor to kill him, but the loss of the bond had her feeling just a touch irrational.

The door slid open, and the Master walked in, carrying a tray. “I thought we could eat breakfast together this morning,” he said smoothly.

Rose honestly couldn’t think of anything she wanted less than to share a meal with the Master, but she was hungry and she didn’t trust his capricious nature, so she nodded silently. The Master’s smile sharpened, and he set the tray down on the table and gestured for her to join him.

“I should tell you a little more about your collar,” he said as he cut into his sausage. “It is essentially a telepathic cloaking device. When it’s activated, you simply do not exist, telepathically.” He chewed on his sausage, then smiled ruefully. “That does mean I won’t be able to access your mind either, even though you’re now cut off from the Doctor’s extra mental barriers, but it’s a trade-off I’m willing to accept. The reaction it got from your bond mate was better than I’d hoped.”

The relief that had washed over Rose when he’d said he still wouldn’t be able to invade her mind was replaced by a sick feeling in her stomach at the casual reference to the Doctor’s trauma. The question sprung to her lips, but she managed to swallow it back—primarily to avoid giving him the satisfaction of provoking her, but also because she really wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

It seemed the Master wanted to tell her, whether she asked or not. “Has the Doctor ever told you how a Time Lord’s brain functions?” he asked.

Rose shook her head, and he set down his fork and knife and leaned back in his chair.

“Humans can do plenty of damage to themselves when under extreme stress, and even your inferior biology has ways of managing shock. But a Time Lord’s brain is vastly more complex. Normally that means we’re more clever, able to process things faster. However, when we’re dealt a severe shock—especially one that is telepathic as well as physical, and even more if it affects the brain itself—that quickness and complexity can cause a chain reaction leading to a mental breakdown.”

The cutlery slipped out of Rose’s numb fingers. Whether he’d meant to or not, he’d triggered memories of the Doctor’s breakdown after their reunion two years ago. The fears that had made her hesitate on their wedding day came back.

Oh, Doctor.

“So we have our own special neurotransmitter that shuts down all non-essential functions until the brain is able to compartmentalise the source of the shock. Of course, my people being what they were, they preferred to take preventative measures rather than run the risk of being made insensible by grief. Hence the cold, detached demeanour most of them affected.”

Rose snorted. “Yeah, but you can’t have the joy without risking the sorrow,” she pointed out. “No wonder you lot sucked the fun out of everything.”

“Your Doctor,” the Master said, continuing as if Rose hadn’t spoken, “seems to have collapsed into
catatonia. He is almost completely unresponsive, curled up in bed with his hand clenched around his wedding ring.”

Rose sucked in a quiet breath and sat down on the edge of her bed, carefully not looking at the Master. “Why are you doing this?” she asked, unable to stop the question even though she knew it displayed exactly the kind of weakness the Master would exploit.

He stood up and collected the tray. At the door, he turned around and smirked at her. “The answer to that is simple, Miss Tyler. Because I can.”

After leaving Rose Tyler in her cell, the Master meandered through the ship, eventually ending up back with the Doctor. In telling the human-Time Lord hybrid about her bond mate’s suffering, a detail he’d almost missed had struck him, and he wanted to see if he was right.

When he opened the doors, the Doctor was in exactly the same position he’d been in when he’d left him the previous night. The Master’s lips curled into a sneer and he shook his head. “You have only yourself to blame, for opening yourself up to that pain,” he muttered.

As much as it offended him when Rose called the Doctor her husband, refusing to acknowledge the marriage bond, he was equally appalled that the Doctor had tied himself in such a permanent way to someone who’d been born human. Rose Tyler didn’t deserve to be the Doctor’s bond mate.

Shaking those thoughts away, he stepped closer and grabbed the Doctor’s arm. Even in his unconscious state, the Doctor held his arm tight to his body, and the Master snarled. “You are going to let me look at your wedding ring,” he growled and, finally, managed to pry it off of the Doctor’s finger.

As he’d suspected, the outside of the band was engraved with a single phrase in their native language: the word forever, followed by the Doctor’s name. He rolled his eyes at the mawkish sentimentality of it and slid the ring back onto the Doctor’s finger.

A smile slid across his face as he left the room. Mawkish it might be, but it could also be yet another chance to use Rose Tyler as a weakness against the Doctor.

The Master returned to Rose’s room for supper the next day. They ate in silence for a few minutes, then he said, “The Doctor’s wedding ring is rather unique.”

Rose froze with a bite of food halfway to her mouth, then quickly finished eating, hoping he hadn’t noticed her moment of weakness. Of course the Master would recognise the script on the Doctor’s ring, she realised, wishing for the first time that she hadn’t designed it the way she had. If the engraving had been inside the band, like a normal ring, he would never have been the wiser.

“Do you even know what it means?”

Rose glared at him. “I chose it, didn’t I? It says, ‘Forever, my Doctor.’”

The Master smirked. “Not quite. You managed to engrave his ring with his given name, one I haven’t heard in centuries. Did the Doctor tell you his name?”

“I know the name he actually uses, which is more important than one he rejected ages ago.”
“So he hasn’t.” The Master clasped his hands together under his chin. “Well, far be it from me to be the one to give you such an intimate secret,” he drawled. “I suppose I could… there would be some pleasure in sullying it for you. But on the other hand, there’s a greater pleasure in knowing that if I don’t tell you, you’ll never know.”

The bangers and mash settled in Rose’s stomach like a rock. “I will see him again,” she said fiercely. The Master laughed. “You humans can be so delightfully hopeful and naive at times.” He shook his head. “But I’ve gotten off track. Seeing his inscription made me wonder…” He snagged Rose’s left hand before she realised what he was doing. She tried to curl her fingers into a fist, but he managed to pry them open and pull her ring off her finger.

“Oh, do be quiet,” he said when she whimpered involuntarily. “I’ll give it back to you. I just want to see what he wrote inside.”

The Cheshire cat grin that spread across his face made Rose sick. “This is too perfect,” he crowed, then dropped the ring into his pocket.

Rose’s heart raced when her ring disappeared from sight. “You said you would give it back to me.”

“And I will. But first I need to borrow it, just for a bit.”

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

The Master stood up and walked to the door. “If you’re a very good girl, I’ll let you watch.”

When the Doctor finally returned to full consciousness, he realised he’d been out for nearly three days. The pounding between his temples told him Rose’s death hadn’t been a dream, but the searing pain had faded, leaving a migraine in its wake.

As bad as the pain was, it became ten times worse shortly after lunch when he forgot and tried to reach for Rose out of habit. The same blinding pain he’d experienced when the bond was severed radiated out from behind his eye, sending him to his knees. The Doctor spent the rest of the afternoon in bed again, this time nursing his headache.

By suppertime, the pain had receded enough to allow for clear thought. He needed something to occupy his telepathy, he realised, or his aching mind would keep searching for Rose and constantly re-injure itself. Thankfully, he had a distraction available—integrating himself into the Archangel matrices.

The Master appeared in his room the day after he woke up. “Well, I see you’ve rejoined the land of the living,” he said cheerfully.

The Doctor didn’t say a word. He’d realised while he was out that part of his nemesis’ goal in killing Rose was to garner a reaction from him—truthfully, almost everything the Master did seemed designed to get a reaction from him.

Refusing to react—refusing to discuss Rose’s death with him at all—was a small victory he could claim.

The Master pulled something out of his pocket and started tossing it into the air and catching it. The small item glinted in the light, and after a moment, the Doctor started when he realised it was Rose’s wedding ring.
All thoughts of remaining silent disappeared. “Give me that,” he growled and tried to snatch it out of the air.

But the Master caught it again and put it back in his pocket. “Sorry, no can do. You know, the inscription on your ring made me curious,” he said. “So when I had a chance, I had to see what you’d put inside hers.”

The Doctor braced himself to hear the words.

“You are my forever,” the Master cooed. “That’s such a sweet sentiment.” He arched an eyebrow. “Too bad forever didn’t last very long.”

“Not long at all,” the Doctor whispered. His aching mind spun with memories—the first time she’d promised him forever and then all the times she’d reaffirmed that promise, finally culminating in their wedding vows. The word was so much a part of who they were that even Tim Latimer had picked up on it.

The grief spiralled through him again, and the Doctor grabbed at his sanity and hung on as tightly as he could. That special neurotransmitter was a gift, but it was also a double-edged sword: if a Time Lord remained too long in the catatonic state it provided, eventually, they would lose all connection to reality.

*Think of Rose,* he told himself fiercely. *She wouldn’t want that for you. She would tell you to fight the bastard.*

The agony slowly simmered back to a dull ache, and the Doctor was able to meet the Master’s gaze head-on. A slight frown crossed the other Time Lord’s face, and the Doctor nodded and leaned back against the wall with his eyes closed.

Ignoring the Master was easier said than done, but after a few minutes, he heard the door to his room slide open and closed. He drew in a deep breath and hid a victorious smile.

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Rose ran her hands through her hair as she paced the length of her quarters. The Master hadn’t made good on his threat to let her see the Doctor’s reaction to her ring. Maybe he’d realised that seeing him again, no matter what the circumstances, could only make her feel better. Because this? This not knowing, not being able to tell how he was feeling? It was driving her spare.

The door slid open, and her captor stepped inside. “Good evening, Rose Tyler.”

Rose shuddered at the sound of her full name on his lips. Coming from him, it didn’t sound at all like it did when the Doctor said it.

“Hello, Harry.”

“I have your ring, as I promised,” he said, and he tossed something small towards her.

Rose caught her ring and quickly slid it back onto her finger, drawing a relieved breath when it was back where it belonged. Without the Doctor in her mind, the ring was the only tangible proof she had that their bond was real.

“I’m sad to say the inscription in your ring seemed to leave the Doctor feeling a little… bereft. He called you his forever, and yet here you are, not even married for two years and your bond is already broken.”
Anger burned hot in Rose’s heart. She’d had a vague idea of what the Master’s plan for her ring was, but to hear him talk so openly about the way he’d taunted the Doctor…

“It isn’t broken,” she seethed. “You’ve just managed to hide it for right now. Once we’re together again, he’ll fix it.”

The Master rolled his eyes. “Oh, your optimistic chatter is tiresome!”

Rose raised an eyebrow. “Yesterday, you said I was ‘delightfully hopeful.’”

“And naive,” the Master retorted.

“Well, if it bothers you that much, you know where the door is.”

Rose jerked her head towards the door, then sat down on her bed with her back to him. Her spine was tense until she heard the door open and close, then she slumped against the wall.

Her mind ached with the unnatural restrictions placed on it by the dampening field. Everything was so empty, and it wasn’t supposed to be.

Focusing inward, she found the hollow place where the Doctor should be. The ache in her chest spread up to her throat, and even though she knew what would happen, she tried to reach out for her bond mate. The Master’s taunts had gotten to her, and she just needed the Doctor.

Pain exploded behind her eyes, and she curled up into a ball with tears streaming down her cheeks. That was only the second time she’d done that, and now she remembered why.

Once the worst of the pain receded, she pulled the blanket up over her head and drifted into an exhausted slumber, fully clothed. Just before she fell asleep, one more thought crossed her mind.

*How long can I live like this?*

*oOoOoOoOo*

It took Martha nearly month to get from Yokohama to San Diego via container ship, getting off at every port-of-call to tell a new story to a group of refugees, then catching the next ship heading towards America. However, neither the time nor the experiences could erase the final image of Japan from her memory. She’d left behind the friends she’d made in the camp, thinking they would be safe. She hadn’t counted on the Master’s ruthlessness.

When she closed her eyes, she still saw the flames against her eyelids as Japan burned. All those people, lost, simply because another alien race had deigned to take over the nation before the Master got there.

She took a deep breath as the ship pulled into the harbour. There were just over four months left in the Doctor’s year. That gave her three months to cover as much ground as possible in the Americas, and then a month to find her way home.

None of her friends in Japan—especially Hito and Tokami—would want her to lose sight of the goal. They’d worked so hard to bring her other prisoners in the camps to hear her stories. She would continue telling those stories in their honour.

Her resolve nearly failed when she spotted the sombre expression on her contact’s face. “What is it? What’s happened?” she asked, not sure she could stand the blow she knew was coming.
“We didn’t think you’d heard,” the tall woman said.

Martha noticed with a sinking stomach that the woman hadn’t actually answered her question. “Not a lot of news reaches you in the hold of a container ship. Now come on, tell me.”

The woman swallowed hard and nodded. “Our operatives on the Valiant… They say Rose Tyler is dead.”

“No!” Martha doubled over, her arms wrapped around her stomach. Not Rose, too. She’d already lost so many friends, but Rose was her best friend, the one who had introduced her to travelling through time and space and made it seem normal.

And if she was devastated to lose Rose, she couldn’t even imagine how the Doctor felt. Oh God, their bond. The bile rose in her throat when she realised how much losing his wife would affect the Doctor physically, and she pressed her hand to her mouth to keep the contents of her stomach down.

A moment later, a hard smile crept across her face.

“Ma’am?” the American asked.

“For once, the Master has overplayed his hand,” she explained. “I travelled with the Doctor and Rose for eight months before the Master took over. Lovely couple, the kind of people you just really want to know and be friends with. But if either of them were ever in danger… well, let’s just say they did a good job protecting each other.”

The other woman rubbed at her chin. “I see.”

Martha shrugged. “What I’m saying is, killing Rose Tyler has only guaranteed the Doctor will do everything in his power to end the Master’s reign. The Master might have had a chance before, but not anymore.”

The American resistance officer led her silently out of the harbour compound. Martha stared up at the bright California sunshine, remembering a trip to Hawaii that seemed like it had been lifetimes ago. They’d spent hours in the sun, basking in the warmth after two months in the London damp.

She would mourn Rose later, when this was all over. For now, like the Doctor, she would focus on ending the Master.

oOoOoOoOo

Without the Doctor to talk to, days on the Valiant dragged for Rose. For a few days, she’d tried to start an exercise regimen of pushups and situps, but when she ended up collapsing into bed and sleeping for a full eighteen hours, she realised physical exertion was out. The TARDIS had been able to help her manage the huon particles in her body well enough that she’d slept like a normal human, but now…

Rose pulled her legs up and wrapped her arms around her knees. It hadn’t occurred to her that being a telepathic non-entity would mean the TARDIS didn’t know she was there. Considering the state the ship’s temporal sensors were probably in, Rose didn’t even think she could look ahead and see that she wasn’t really gone. At any rate, she was left to deal with the strain of the huon particles on her body alone.

It made her doubly glad when a week, then two, went by without the Master coming in to taunt her. Even though she was almost lonely enough that she would have welcomed the company, she definitely did not want him to know how dependent she was on the TARDIS, and how defenceless
she was now without her.

Strangely enough, Lucy Saxon was her only companion. If rumours of her death were to be exaggerated as much as Rose suspected the Master was doing, he couldn’t very well let guards see that she was alive. Who knew who they might tell?

So instead, Lucy brought her meals, every day. Rose tried to talk to her a few times, but her attempts only made the other woman jittery, so by the end of the first week, she gave up.

Well, at least now I know why Greg told me he thought the Master wanted people to forget I was even here.

oOoOoOoOo

Jack leaned back in his chair and shot Greg a cheeky grin when he entered the room. “What can I do for you today, Greg?”

The light-hearted attitude was a facade. A month ago, Greg had told him about Rose’s death—but Jack refused to believe it. The Master had to be faking, somehow. Rose Tyler couldn’t be dead.

And apparently, the Master had taken his disbelief as a challenge. Since then, not a day had gone by without someone coming to his room to tell him about Rose’s death, or the Doctor’s grief. Despite his best intentions, Jack was slowly being worn down.

Greg took him by the arm and yanked him to his feet. “Hey, be careful with the shirt,” Jack protested. “It’s the only I’ve got until they kill me again, you know.”

“Shut it, Harkness,” Greg growled. He dragged him through the door and down the corridor. “Our Master has finally figured out the one person you’ll believe.”

Jack watched where they were going and quickly recognised their destination. “You’re taking me to the flight deck. Does your Master plan to tell me Rose is dead to my face? No offence, buddy, but he’s not exactly the most trustworthy guy.”

Greg didn’t answer, and Jack didn’t have it in him to keep up the fake chatter. The two men walked in silence to the flight deck, and when the doors opened, Jack saw the last person he’d expected to see.

“Doc!” He walked over to the conference table and sat down across from the Doctor. The circles under the Doctor’s eyes and the lines on his forehead made Jack’s heart sink, but he forced joviality into his voice when he said, “Well, long time, no see.”

The Doctor’s mouth barely twitched into a smile. “Hello, Jack.”

Jack leaned on the table. “Doc, I’ve got to ask. They keep telling me Rose is dead, but I couldn’t…”

The Doctor pressed his lips into a thin line and took a ragged breath, and Jack slumped into his seat.

“No. It can’t be. She’s a Time Lord—he can’t just kill her.”

The Doctor shrugged. “Apparently, he can. We never knew if she could regenerate, remember?” He tapped his finger to his temple. “She’s gone, Jack.”

Jack had watched the Doctor grieve for Rose before. His blue eyes had been empty then, all the life gone out of them. This time, they were so full of pain and loss and anger, Jack had to look away for
“Is it as bad as you thought it would be?” he asked once he looked at the Doctor again.

The Doctor’s eyes closed. “Worse.”

The bleakness in his voice made Jack want to cry. It also infuriated him. The Doctor and Rose had been through so much, and they were finally happy together. He swore softly, and a small smile crossed the Doctor’s face.

“That’s pretty much how I feel about it,” he agreed. “But…” He swallowed. “I’m trying to be strong, like Rose would want.”

Jack looked hard at his friend and saw a glint of purpose in his eyes. The Doctor still had a plan, he realised. It was a plan to save the Earth, not Rose, but he had something to focus on.

“Well, I’d offer to be here for you if you ever need to talk,” Jack said wryly, “but somehow, I don’t think they’re going to allow that.”

“Thank you, Jack.”

“Hey, you weren’t the only one who loved her.”

The Doctor flinched, and it took Jack a moment to realise he’d spoken in the past tense. Before he could stumble through an apology that might just make things worse, the doors slid open again and the Master and Lucy entered the room.

“Such a touching display on behalf of your wife, Doctor,” the Master said. “I have to thank you for finally convincing Captain Jack that Rose Tyler is dead—he wouldn’t believe anyone else.”

Jack waited for the Doctor to lash out at the Master, but instead, he pressed his hands to the table, palm down, and stared straight ahead. The muscle in his jaw was twitching, so Jack knew the Doctor was angry, but…

He narrowed his eyes and tilted his head, and a moment later, he finally got it. This was the Master’s game. Constantly talking to the Doctor about Rose and trying to get a reaction from him. But the Doctor was refusing to play along.

The Master turned his simpering smile on Jack, and he rolled his eyes at the Time Lord. “And thank you, Jack. I’ve been worried about the Doctor for weeks. It isn’t good to bottle up grief the way he’s done, but no matter what I do, he refuses to talk about his loss.”

Jack and the Doctor shared a surprised, and yet resigned, look. Of course this whole encounter was a chance for the Master to use both of them for maximum efficacy.

“Hey Doc.” Jack leaned back in his chair. “Did I ever tell you about the time I was caught on Ephrem without transport?”

The Doctor frowned. “No, but…”

“It was just before I met you, actually,” he said, smoothly cutting off the Doctor’s objections. The Master had brought him here to expose the Doctor’s grief, but he wouldn’t be a part of that. There were plenty of other things they could talk about.

“I’d been trying to find a way into the Time Agency for about six months by that point, and I caught
a ride—okay, I stowed away on a passenger ship bound for Grewel. Only they discovered me—”

“Naked?” the Doctor interjected, a grin toying with the corners of his mouth.

“Is there any other way to be?” Jack shot back.

The Doctor rolled his eyes, but Jack saw the gratitude in them. He opened his mouth to continue his story, but the Master interrupted.

“Fascinating as this is,” he said, a faint scowl on his face, “I didn’t invite you here to listen to stories of your conquests.” His lips curled in a sneer on the last word. “Did you really care so little for Rose Tyler that you can dismiss her loss that easily?”

The Doctor turned to stone, but Jack didn’t have quite that much control over his emotions. “No, you brought me here so you could watch the grief on my friend’s face as you tormented him with memories of his wife.” He jumped to his feet. “What kind of sick bastard are you?” he asked as he rushed the Master.

The Master rolled his eyes and pulled his laser screwdriver out of his pocket. “The kind who’s already killed you dozens of times,” he said as he shot Jack Harkness.

A slight shudder in the timelines ran through the Master, but after over a year of planning and working on the paradox machine, he was almost immune to uncomfortable timelines by now. He pocketed the screwdriver and turned to look at the Doctor, who was staring at Jack’s body.

“You didn’t have to kill him. What does that prove, anyway, since he just comes back?”

“He wasn’t doing what I wanted him to do,” the Master said frankly. “Much like your Rose. Have I told you why I killed her, Doctor?”

As expected, the Doctor’s only response was a slight dilation of his pupils and an indrawn breath he couldn’t conceal.

“She offered to take me with you when you left.”

The Doctor’s jaw dropped slightly and his gaze swung to meet the Master’s. “That’s right,” the Master said. “She was so certain that whatever plan you’ve cooked up will work… how does it feel to know her confidence in you was misplaced? Anyway,” he continued, eager to strike the final blow, “she said that if I came with you, the two of you could work together and find a way to stop the sound of drums that has haunted me ever since I looked into the Untempered Schism.”

The Doctor’s nostrils flared. “Do you mean,” he said, each word spoken with careful precision, “that you killed Rose because she showed you compassion?”

The Master rocked back on his heels. “I suppose I did,” he agreed, feeling gleeful that he’d finally managed to get the Doctor to talk about his bond mate. “How does that make you feel?” he asked.

As expected, the Doctor looked at him with cold eyes, and the Master rubbed his hands together gleefully. At last, he could see the Doctor’s anger.

A loud gasp interrupted the moment before the Doctor could say anything, and both the Master and the Doctor looked down at the floor as Jack Harkness came back to life. “Oh, why won’t you just stay dead?” the Master demanded. He didn’t need to look at the Doctor to know the interruption had given him time to recollect himself.
“Been asking myself that for over a hundred years,” Jack grunted as he pushed himself to his feet. “Doesn’t seem to make much of a difference.”

The Master scowled and pointed at a guard standing near the door. “Take them both back to their rooms,” he ordered. There was no point in trying to taunt the Doctor further today.

The Doctor’s senses swam, filled with Rose again for the first time in five months. For a moment, all the remembered pain threatened to overshadow his joy at being with her again, but then he felt her touch in his mind, gently redirecting his focus.

The relief of having her in his mind again—the absolute rightness of it—overwhelmed him. He needed to feel her mind as close to his as possible. Mirroring that need, he pulled Rose into his arms and carefully laid them both down on the couch, their heads resting on the same throw pillow.

Despite aching for Rose, the Doctor was hesitant to approach her telepathically. She…it had been months since she’d had any telepathic contact at all. What if she didn’t want him anymore? What if she’d gotten used to having her mind to herself?

It was Rose who deepened their bond to its fullest extent. Rose who approached him, Rose who rested her soul against his in a way that made the Doctor sigh with pleasure. They were together again.

The Doctor woke with a smile on his face and reached for Rose. Being home with her was…

The ache in his mind stopped him from finishing that thought. He slowly opened his eyes, not wanting to see the bare white walls of his room on the Valiant, instead of the warm honey tones their bedroom walls were painted.

A dream. Of course it was just a dream. You’ll never be home with Rose again.

The TARDIS hummed weakly at the edges of the Doctor’s mind. In the two months since Rose’s death, she’d tried to be there for him, to distract him from the silence in his mind. Having her didn’t make up for losing his bond mate, but at least he hadn’t been abandoned completely.

He rubbed at his temples. The headache had never gone away, and he suspected it never would. Cutting a telepathic connection as close as a bond left deep wounds on the mind, ones that could only be healed if the connection were restored.

The physical pain blended with his grief, making it impossible for him to tell where one left off and the other began. He missed Rose so much, there was a constant lump in his throat as he choked back tears.

And the empty spot in his mind where she was supposed be echoed painfully. He was always reaching for her, always trying to find her…and she wasn’t there.

The Doctor sighed and leaned back against the wall. Being cut off from Rose had weakened him telepathically, and his progress with Archangel had slowed to a crawl. Integrating himself with the network’s telepathic matrices when his own telepathic centre was so damaged was like walking on a broken leg—but he kept at it, because it was the only hope he had. The only hope of saving the Earth, the only hope of stopping the Master…

The only hope of seeing Rose again.
He’d tried to ask the TARDIS what would happen when the paradox reversed. Logically, he knew that at the epicentre of events, likely only time would reverse on the Valiant. Unlike the rest of the planet, what had been done here would stay done—including Rose’s death.

But the TARDIS hadn’t been able to answer, her temporal sensors stretched as they were to maintain the paradox. And without a definitive no, the Doctor was able to hope. Maybe, just maybe, he could have Rose back when this hellish year was over.

Rose was playing solitaire when her television clicked on. She glanced at the screen automatically, then stared when she saw the Doctor, lying on his bed.

The Master had clearly just entered the room, because the Doctor wasn’t even looking at him yet. “Can I help you with something?” he said.

Rose scooted her chair closer to the screen and scrutinised every inch of the Doctor she could see. His arms were supporting his head, and he had his legs crossed at the ankle. In profile, she thought his face maybe looked more lined than it had been before, but it was hard to tell.

“I thought I would come ask how you’re doing,” the Master said.

The Doctor pushed himself up so he was sitting on edge of his bed, and Rose touched his face on the screen. She’d been right; exhaustion and grief had drawn lines around his eyes and mouth that made him look older than he usually did. He ran a hand through his hair, and she smiled when it stayed sticking up.

“I’m fine.” His voice sounded tired, but not resigned, at least.

The Master tapped his fingers against the table. “Are you really? Because I’ve heard losing a marriage bond can be excruciating. That’s what the legends said, anyway.”

Rose swore at the Master, not caring that he was too far away to hear. “Leave him alone,” she ordered, following the string of invectives.

The Doctor’s left eyebrow arched up, and she wanted to cry at that familiar smug expression. “Ah, but none of the people in those legends had what I have.”

The Master’s eyebrows drew together. “What do you have? You don’t have anything that I haven’t given you. Even that bag of jelly babies and the picture you cling to are gifts I’ve allowed you to keep.”

“I have a way to get Rose back.”

“Really?” The Master laughed. “After all the lecturing you’ve done about my paradox, you would be willing to cause another, just to bring your hybrid back? So much for the moral high ground, eh, Doctor?”

The Master left the room, but Rose’s gaze didn’t leave the screen. A way to get me back? What is he planning?

Now that the Master was gone, some of the Doctor’s confidence disappeared, replaced by desperation. He shoved both of his hands into his hair and scratched his scalp, leaving him looking like a hedgehog.
Watching him, Rose realised that whatever plan he had, it was a slim hope at best. But he was clinging to it to stay sane.

Her own door opened, and the television clicked off. “Did you enjoy the show?” the Master asked.

Rose turned around slowly. “You let me see him. Why?”

“I let you see how damaged he is,” the Master corrected. “Didn’t you hear him say that he’d be willing to create a paradox, just to get you back?”

Rose tilted her head. The Doctor hadn’t actually said that. He’d just said he had a way…

*Paradox.*

Somehow, Rose managed not to gasp when the pieces finally fell into place. Instead, she shrugged. “You and I both know he won’t actually do it,” she said, “so I don’t see why it matters that he considers it. He’ll realise what a bad idea it is, and the TARDIS will help.”

The Master rolled his eyes. “The two of you and your unending belief in each other—how dull and boring. He thinks you’re dead, and he still believes he’ll see you again!”

“So sorry to upset you,” Rose snarked.

The Master huffed and stormed out of the room.

As soon as she was alone, Rose started thinking about the possibility that had just occurred to her from every possible angle. The Doctor had never told her what his plan was, but the Master’s mention of paradoxes had given her an idea.

*What would happen if the Doctor could undo the paradox the Master caused? The Earth would revert to its natural state, or at least what it had been like before the Master took over.*

It would explain why he hadn’t struggled with guilt when the Master burned Japan. If he could undo the events of the last year, then the loss of that country was only temporary.

And that was his plan to get her back. He was banking all his chips on the idea that once the paradox reset, she would no longer be dead.

Rose wanted to take him and cuddle him close and tell him that she wasn’t dead now, thank you very much, but she contented herself with creating a countdown calendar, counting to the day the Doctor had always said would bring the TARDIS back to life. Hopefully, it was also the day they would be together again.

**oOoOoOoOo**

Three months after the Master cut her off from all telepathic contact, Rose woke up to the nagging sensation that she was forgetting something. Her time senses were insisting the date was important, like she’d set an alert for it on her phone and then forgotten about it.

She lay back in bed, trying to figure out what it was. Not her birthday—that had come and gone before the Master… Rose shuddered at the unending emptiness in her mind. Well, before.

Then she realised there was only one other date she would want to keep track of. Today was their second anniversary.

Her strong facade cracked for the first time. The emptiness in her mind haunted her as she
remembered the final vows from their wedding: *I take you as my bond mate, sharing my life, my mind, and all I am with you. I promise never to lie to you, and to be true to our bond through regeneration after regeneration, until we are finally parted by death.*

Even though she knew this wasn’t her fault, Rose still felt guilty over the loss of the bond. That one glimpse she’d gotten of him a month ago had been worrying. Thinking of him struggling with both the broken bond and his unnecessary grief hurt. This was her fault—she should be there for him.

The door opened, interrupting her guilty meditations. “Hello, Lucy.”

Lucy’s eyes had the empty look Rose recognised from some of her mates when they’d gotten into drugs. The Master was drugging his wife—but why did that surprise her?

Lucy shifted the breakfast tray in her hands and the fork dropped on the floor. Rose watched curiously as she bent down to pick it up.

“They Doctor had been different since losing you. He’s… harder. More closed off,” she said quietly. “Harry isn’t afraid of the Doctor, but when I take him his food, I see something in his eyes… I’m afraid of what will happen if he doesn’t know you’re alive.”

Rose rolled over onto her stomach and wrapped her arms around her pillow. “You should be,” she mumbled. “There’s not much that can upset him like this.”

“If I tell him you’re alive, will he be able to keep it a secret that he knows?”

Nervous hope shot through Rose, but she managed to stay reclining on her bed, not showing any outward reaction to the question. “Definitely.”

“Think of a message I can give him. I’ll get it from you this afternoon when I bring your lunch.”

The Doctor had tried for weeks to ignore the anniversary approaching, but he couldn’t any longer. For the first time since Rose’s death, he pulled out her photo. The picture was creased from being in his shirt pocket for months, and the corners were worn. But it was still his precious Rose, looking radiant in the golden light of the setting sun.

When Lucy brought his breakfast, he slid the picture back into his pocket and took a shuddering breath to bring himself under control, but his hand shook when he picked the knife up. Her gaze fell to his hand, then met his, and he was surprised to see both fear and sympathy there.

Wanting to acknowledge that tiny bit of kindness, he pressed his lips together and nodded once before turning his attention to his food. He’d become proficient at hiding both his heartache and his steadily worsening state of mind, but the advent of their wedding anniversary—the first he would spend without Rose—almost broke him.

He tried to focus on Archangel that morning, but memories of Rose constantly invaded his thoughts. It had been ten months since he’d seen her and three since her death, but her voice, her laugh, her beautiful smile—he still remembered them all.

Lucy was jittery when she arrived with his lunch, and he tried to stand to take the tray from her. “No!” she exclaimed, jerking slightly. “Just… sit. I’m fine.”

Except the way she tried to pull away from him made the water glass tip over. It shattered on the hard floor, sending glass and water everywhere. Not caring if she wanted help or not, the Doctor got
down with her on his hands and knees to clean up the mess.

To his surprise, as soon as they were both bowed over the floor with their faces hidden from the camera, Lucy started speaking rapidly.

“Doctor. The Wolf has only been silenced—your story is not over. And... she says you get a pass this year, but you’d better take her to Barcelona for your next anniversary.”

The Doctor made himself move, knowing that if he visibly reacted to Lucy’s words, the Master would get suspicious. They finished cleaning the floor and then he sat at the table and ate lunch without tasting a single bite of it.

When he was done eating and a guard had taken the empty tray, the Doctor bent over, put his elbows on his knees, and rested his head in his hands. Was it even possible that Rose was still alive? If it was anyone but the Master, he’d never believe it. But the man was as brilliant as he was sadistic—if anyone could come up with a way to block a marriage bond, it would be him. And nothing would amuse him more than watching the Doctor grieve, knowing all the while that Rose wasn’t actually dead.

Unbidden, a line from one of their favourite films came to the Doctor. “Westley and I are joined by the bonds of love. And you cannot track that, not with a thousand bloodhounds, and you cannot break it, not with a thousand swords.”

It was actually one of the lines he had helped William Goldman write. The author had been struggling to find the perfect description of true love that would give Buttercup strength and, remembering the stories he’d read of marriage bonds, the Doctor had suggested the idea of love as an unbreakable bond. It fit so well with Westley’s earlier claim, “Death cannot stop true love,” that Goldman had been thrilled.

In the end, it was the actual words Lucy had used that convinced him. They echoed Tim perfectly. That, combined with the very personal reference to their first anniversary and his continually thwarted plans to return to Barcelona, slowly convinced him that it was real.

The Doctor rubbed his hands over his face and let out a breathless laugh. Rose was alive. Rose was alive.

-oOoOoOoOo-

Martha stood on the forecastle of the cargo ship leaving New York Harbour. For once, she didn’t have to hide—at least, not yet. The cargo company this ship belonged to was owned by a member of the American Underground who had managed to hold onto his business during the Master’s regime.

She took a deep breath of the sea breeze, remembering another trip across this same body of water. In the city’s timeline, it had been 70 years since she’d been there last. For her, it had been eighteen months. Staring at the Statue of Liberty, she felt a glimmer of hope that freedom might still be possible for humanity. The year was almost over. The time of reckoning was at hand.

Chapter End Notes
The first person to find the Labyrinth reference and point it out to me on Tumblr @chocolatequeennk gets a sneak peek at the next chapter.
A tiny pinprick of light brightened as the row boat approached land. The boat’s lantern flashed the answer to the member of the resistance who was signalling them in, letting him know they were safe.

Martha stood on the bow, anticipation thrumming through her veins as the coast of Britain grew closer. She’d seen too much in the last year to expect things to be like they were when she left, but this was still home.

When the hull of the boat hit soft sand, Martha jumped into the shallow water and jogged up to the shore. She heard a splash behind her as the rowers pushed the boat through the breakers to begin their dangerous trip home, but she ran to the man standing on the beach without looking back.

“What’s your name, then?” she asked, wincing when she sounded more like a commander greeting the newest recruit than an average person meeting someone new.

“Tom… Milligan,” he said, adding his last name as an afterthought. “No need to ask who you are.” He looked Martha up and down. “The famous Martha Jones. How long since you were last in Britain?”

“Three hundred and sixty-five days.” Martha told him, skipping the details of the first three weeks of the Master’s reign. “It’s been a long year.”

To his credit, Tom accepted that without offering any platitudes. He nodded towards the beach access road. “I’m parked over here.”

A year of travelling, always keeping one step ahead of the Master, had trained Martha to stay alert. She scanned the area while they walked and kept an ear out for anything unnatural, but all she heard was the constant pounding of the surf beside them.

“So what’s the plan?” Tom asked.

Martha nearly laughed. If only he knew how crazy the plan was—but she couldn’t tell him. “This Professor Docherty,” she said, reiterating what the coded message she’d sent earlier had told the British resistance. “I need to see her. Can you get me there?”

Tom cast her a sidelong glance, and she could see the curiosity in his eyes. The resistance knew the names of everyone the Master had blackmailed into his service.

“She works in a repair shed, Nuclear Plant Seven. I can get you inside. What’s all this for? What’s so important about her?”

Martha refused to meet his gaze. “Sorry, the more you know, the more you’re at risk.”

“There’s a lot of people depending on you. You’re a bit of a legend.”

With the conversation on safer ground, Martha allowed a small smile to cross her face. “What does the legend say?”

“That you sailed the Atlantic, walked across America. That you were the only person to get out of Japan alive.” The litany of her trials wiped the smile off her face. “Martha Jones, they say, she’s going to save the world.” Tom snorted softly. “Bit late for that.”
A lorry was in sight now, and Martha asked the question that had been bothering her since he’d told her he had a vehicle. “How come you can drive? Don’t you get stopped?” She hated her suspicions, but Prince Humperdinck’s words had become her motto: “I always believe everything could be a trap. It’s why I’m still alive.”

Tom unlocked the doors. “Medical staff. Used to be in paediatrics back in the old days. But that gives me a licence to travel so I can help out other labour camps.”

The irony hit Martha hard. “Great. I’m travelling with a doctor,” she muttered as she buckled her seat belt.

Tom gave her a sidelong glance as he started the engine. “Story goes that you’re the only person on Earth who can kill him. That you, and you alone, can kill the Master stone dead.”

“Let’s just drive,” Martha said flatly, and without another word, he put the vehicle into gear.

Martha took advantage of the drive and slept. The risk that Tom wasn’t who he said he was was lower than the risk of not getting enough rest. She jolted awake when they pulled off the motorway and blinked against the bright morning sun.

Tom handed her a protein bar and a canteen of water. “We’re almost there.”

“Thanks,” she told him, grateful for something to put in her empty stomach.

They reached a quarry twenty minutes later and started picking their way through the rocks. A giant statue of the Master loomed over them, and Martha glared up at it before moving on.

“All over the Earth, those things. He’s even carved himself into Mount Rushmore.”

“Best to keep down,” Tom said in a low voice. He led the way up some rocks, and they peered over the rim of the quarry. The Downs had been stripped to the chalk bed to make room for rocket silos. “Here we go. The entire south coast of England, converted into shipyards. They bring in slave labour every morning. Break up cars, houses, anything, just for the metal. Building a fleet out of scrap.”

“You should see Russia,” Martha whispered. “That’s Shipyard Number One. All the way from the Black Sea to the Bering Strait, there’s a hundred thousand rockets getting ready for war.”

Tom looked at her. “War? With who?”

“The rest of the universe.”

The thought of all the planets she’d seen with the Doctor and Rose being attacked by the Master killed her—and the people! What about Archie, the sweet badger pirate? Or Riley, the bloke she’d shared a kiss with after they’d nearly fallen into a sun together?

Martha swallowed and forced the thoughts back. “I’ve been out there, Tom, in space, before all this happened, and there’s a thousand different civilisations all around us with no idea of what’s happening here. The Master can build weapons big enough to devastate them all.”

“You’ve been in space?” Tom repeated.

Martha raised an eyebrow. “Problem with that?”

“No.” He shook his head, then huffed out a laugh. “No, just er, wow. Anything else I should know?”
We can travel in time, too. The memory made Martha smile. “I’ve met Shakespeare.”

The too-familiar whooshing noise filled the air, and Martha and Tom looked over their shoulders. When she verified that spheres were coming towards them, Martha turned back to the shipyard and held still.

“Identify, little man,” they demanded.

“I’ve got a licence,” Tom stammered, and Martha willed him not to look at her, not to mention her. “Thomas Milligan, Peripatetic Medical Squad. I’m allowed to travel. I was just checking for—”

His explanation was interrupted. “Soon the rockets will fly, and everyone will need medicine. You’ll be so busy.”

Their insane laughter sent a shiver down Martha’s spine. Even after a year, she wasn’t used to the derangement of the spheres.

They flew over Martha’s head and down to the shipyard below. “But they didn’t see you,” Tom said, the question evident in his voice.

“How do you think I travelled the world?” Martha pulled her key out from under her coat and held it up.

Tom held out a hand and helped her to her feet. “All right then, explain,” he asked as they walked back to the lorry.

Martha gave him the explanation the Doctor had offered, so long ago it felt like it had been a different lifetime. “Because the Master set up Archangel, that mobile network, fifteen satellites around the planet, but really it’s transmitting this low level psychic field. That’s how everyone got hypnotised into thinking he was Harold Saxon.”

“Saxon,” Tom muttered as they reached the lorry. “Feels like years ago.”

“But the key’s tuned in to the same frequency,” she continued. “Makes me sort of… not invisible, just unnoticeable.”

Tom looked over at her. “Well, I can see you.”

Martha stopped walking and looked up at him. “That’s because you wanted to.” He smirked, and she laughed at the unintentionally flirtatious way those words had come out.

He grinned at her. “Yeah, I suppose I did.”

“Is there a Mrs Milligan?” she asked, the normalcy of the question overriding the voice in her head that said it wasn’t a good idea to continue this line of conversation.

If she’d surprised him, he recovered quickly. “No. No. What about you?”

“No. My sister keeps pushing me to get a social life, but…” Thinking about Tish brought reality crashing back down on her, and she climbed into the lorry without looking at Tom again. “Come on, I’ve got to find this Docherty woman.”

The Doctor rubbed at his face. It had been one year since he’d arrived on the Valiant. One year since the Master had captured him. One year since he’d sent Martha to walk the Earth.
One year since he’d held Rose.

His hands clenched into fists at the last thought. Knowing she was alive had assuaged his grief, but he still couldn’t feel her in his mind. After Lucy’s revelation, he’d tried reaching out for Rose again, thinking that maybe now that he knew she was alive, he could find her. It had been a foolish hope, and he knew it even as the pain pierced his temple.

Even the TARDIS couldn’t find her. She had apologised profusely when they’d discovered Rose was alive, and the Doctor had found himself in the unusual position of reassuring his ship. It took work, but he finally convinced her that Rose wouldn’t blame her for any ill effects she’d suffered due to their separation.

And that will end tomorrow, he reminded himself.

The door to his cell opened, and Greg walked in. “The Master wants you on the flight deck.”

“Well, let’s not keep him waiting,” the Doctor said with patently false cheer. The two men shared a look, and the Doctor was satisfied that everyone knew their part in the afternoon’s drama.

Greg took him by the arm and directed him down the corridor. This had become a pattern over the last month; as the final stage of the Master’s paradox drew closer, he’d started to demand the Doctor’s presence almost daily, to taunt him about the fate of the Earth and to reminisce over their childhood on Gallifrey.

But he hadn’t mentioned Rose in weeks. The Doctor smirked to himself as they approached the flight deck. At the very least, he could take comfort in knowing he hadn’t given the Master the response he’d hoped for. The last thing he’d wanted when he pretended to kill the Doctor’s bond mate was a complete lack of reaction.

The Doctor could hear music through the doors, so it didn’t surprise him when the Master was dancing with his wife when he walked onto the flight deck. Lucy looked at the Doctor over her husband’s shoulder, and he wondered how it was that the Master, such a skilled manipulator, couldn’t tell he no longer held his wife in the palm of his hand.

Francine was clearing the table from tea. She looked up at the Doctor quickly, and he nodded.

The music trailed off, and the Master spun Lucy away. She tottered a little in her high heels, and the Doctor noticed the glazed look in her eyes. Drugged, he realised, contempt rising in him—contempt and a fear for Rose’s state that he tried to push to the back of his mind.

The Master turned and beckoned to him, and the Doctor joined him at the porthole. Clouds obscured their view of the ground below, but the blue sky above was the same as it had been.


The Master looked out the porthole at his creation. “Have you even figured out what the Toclafane are, Doctor?” he asked, his voice almost sing-song.

The Doctor didn’t answer, and the Master chuckled. “You haven’t, have you? Well, you’ll find out soon enough, but first, I have a question for you.” He leaned against the bulkhead. “They say Martha Jones has come back home. Now why would she do that?”

The Doctor glared at him. Even though it was part of the plan for the Master to bring Martha to the
Valiant, he didn’t have to fake the loathing in his voice when he said, “Leave her alone.”

The Master raised an eyebrow. “But you said something to her, didn’t you? On the day I took control. What did you tell her?”

“To take the Vortex manipulator and get out,” the Doctor said automatically. “To run, to never stay in one place because you would chase her.” He smiled at the Master, feeling so proud of Martha Jones. “And she didn’t, did she? Your UCF officers never could track her down.”

The Master’s eyes narrowed, and the Doctor braced himself for the feeling of the other Time Lord pushing into his mind. He honestly didn’t know if he could keep him out, so he was relieved when the computer announced their return to zone one airspace.

The Master spun around and started clapping, trying to drum up excitement. “Come on, people! What are we doing? Launch day in twenty-four hours.”

The Doctor stayed at the porthole, but he dropped his hands and clasped them behind his back. If anyone had been watching, they might have noticed that he held three fingers up.

The Doctor had one very big advantage that the Master never considered: he knew his old friend. He knew what he would do, and what he would expect.

The latter was the reason the Doctor had worked hard to put together the fake attempt to stop the Master. It was important that he appear to try, even though he wasn’t looking forward to what the end results might be.

They’d used the guards that weren’t loyal to the Master to pass messages around the ship, and the time was almost here. The Doctor ignored the Master getting a massage and focused on the countdown.

Come on, Jack, he begged silently. Don’t let me down.

“Condition red,” the computer announced, right on schedule.

The Master looked up from the massage table. “What the hell?”

Francine grabbed the Master’s suit jacket from where he’d draped it over a chair and tossed it to the Doctor. He pulled the laser screwdriver out of the pocket, then pivoted and pointed the device at the Master.

“Oh, I see.” The Master held his hands up, though the smirk he barely concealed belied the conciliatory gesture.

“I told you when you killed Rose that you would regret it.”

The Master stared down at him for a moment, then started laughing. Despite knowing Rose was actually alive, the thought of someone laughing over her death made the Doctor’s hearts race, and he wished he could actually kill the Master, here and now.

He thumbed the controls on the screwdriver and pressed the button, but as he’d expected, nothing happened. The Master plucked it from his fingers and leaned down to whisper in his ear.

“Isomorphic controls.” He held the Doctor’s gaze, then reared back and punched him in the face.
The Doctor spun and hit the floor, then glared balefully at the Master.

“Which means they only work for me,” the Master added for the benefit of the others in the room. “Like this.” He pointed the screwdriver at Francine and fired a laser beam just to the right of her shoulder. “Say sorry!”


“Mum!” Tish ran to her side.

“Didn’t you learn anything from the blessed Saint Martha?” The Master descended from the bridge, and his wife hurried over to him, picking up his jacket along the way. “Siding with the Doctor is a very dangerous thing to do.” Lucy helped him into his jacket, and then the Master looked at the guards. “Take them away.”

The Doctor silently apologised to Francine and Tish as guards hustled them out of the room. He knew Rose would tell him this wasn’t his fault, but whether it was or not, their lives had still been torn apart, largely due to their family’s connection to him.

The Master sat down at the conference table. “Come talk with me, Doctor,” he ordered.

The Doctor pushed himself up off the floor and took the chair across from the Master.

“Oh, do you know,” the Master said conversationally, “I remember the days when the Doctor, oh, that famous Doctor, was waging a Time War, battling Sea Devils and Axons. He sealed the rift at the Medusa Cascade single handed. And look at him now. Stealing screwdrivers. How did he ever come to this?” He let the question linger in the air for a moment, then grinned. “Oh yeah, me.”

The Master’s laughter annoyed the Doctor more than his ridiculous speech, and he glared at him. “You could be so much more than this, Master.”

“Oh, but why would I want to? You keep trying to pull me into your do-gooding life, Doctor, but you’ve never understood—this is fun.”

His smile disappeared after a moment. “You know, I really can’t let your little game go unpunished. I’m afraid, Doctor, that you’ve brought this upon yourself.”

The Master stood and dragged the Doctor by the arm over to the wall. For the first time, the Doctor noticed the two sets of shackles that had been bolted here.

“You’re going to chain me up, Master?” he said.

“Like I said”—the Master chained his arms to the wall first, then knelt in front of the Doctor to restrain his ankles—“you’ve only brought this upon yourself.”

He straightened and examined the Doctor critically before nodding once. “I’ll just leave you here to consider what you’ve done,” he said, then waved cheerily and left the room.

Rose woke up when her door slid open, but she didn’t sit up. According to her countdown calendar, tomorrow was the day the Doctor would undo the paradox machine and take care of the Master. She’d been trying to sleep more for the last week, so she had as much energy as possible when the day came.
“Your bond mate doesn’t seem properly impressed by my plan,” the Master said nonchalantly.

She turned her head and looked at the Master for a moment, then stared at the ceiling again. “Plans for world domination rarely impress the Doctor.”

Rose’s voice felt hoarse and rusty from lack of use. Even Lucy hadn’t spoken to her in weeks, whether due to a direct order from the Master, or because she was afraid of looking too friendly, Rose didn’t know.

She heard the chair scrape across the floor and glanced over as the Master sat down. He tipped the chair up onto the back legs and stared at the ceiling.

“This is one of my better plans though,” he complained. “Tomorrow, the rockets launch. The new Time Lord empire will begin by destroying anyone who stands in my way.”

Rose rubbed at her temple. Blimey, he didn’t half go on. And she thought the Doctor could talk—maybe all Time Lords were naturally verbose?

“I’m sure it’s very impressive,” she said, matching the condescension he usually turned on her. “And next year, maybe you can go to the annual conference of psychotic dictators and present your paper on how you destroyed the Earth in five easy steps. Until then, you’ll have to live with people’s disapproval.”

The Master glared at her, and for the first time, Rose felt a little afraid for her life. “I’ve tolerated your cheek all year,” he said, his voice low and hard. “But the year is almost over. The only reason why you are still alive, Miss Tyler, is because I want the Doctor to witness the moment when I kill you for real.”

He stood up so quickly that the chair scooted backwards across the floor. “Enjoy your last day.” With those parting words, he stalked out of the room.

Rose took a few deep breaths to get her fear under control, then she allowed herself the luxury of imagining her reunion with the Doctor. There were so many things she wanted to do when she saw him again, but the throbbing ache in her head made one thing paramount.

Please, Rose begged the universe. Please let the Doctor be able to undo this collar.

oOoOoOoOo

“I assume you have a reason for wanting to talk to Professor Docherty,” Tom asked as they drove around to the other side of the shipyard.

Martha nodded. “I need the Master to know everything we know when we leave her workshop tonight.”

At the fence surrounding the main shipyard facility, Martha waited for Tom to use the wire cutters on the chain link fence, then she ducked through the gap and ran towards the building.

Tom’s eyes cut over towards her once he caught up. “Everything?”

“Everything,” she said firmly.

Remember, this woman is a spy for the Master, she told herself as they entered the building. Sadly, it wasn’t the first time in the last year that she’d purposely used one of the Master’s collaborators to pass along false information, so she had practice in sticking to the script and not letting anything
“Professor Docherty?” Tom called out.

“Who’s asking?” a grumpy voice asked from their left.

Martha and Tom followed the voice and found Professor Docherty wearing a magnifying glass strapped to her head, sitting at a table surrounded by electronic gadgets.

They exchanged glances, and Tom offered their introduction. “They, er, they sent word ahead. I’m Tom Milligan. This is Martha Jones.”

A flicker of recognition crossed the woman’s face. “You’re the one who travelled with the Doctor.”

“With the Doctor and Rose,” Martha corrected. Out of everything the Master had done during the last year, few things annoyed her more than the way he’d edited Rose out of the Doctor’s life. With the exception of the Underground and Resistance, both of whom received information directly from the Valiant, no one had heard of her.

The furrow between Professor Docherty’s eyebrows deepened. “I’m sorry, I don’t know…”

“Rose is—was—the Doctor’s wife,” Martha explained. “They always worked as partners. The Doctor might be the one with the idea to get rid of the Master, but you can bet Rose was helping… at least until the Master killed her.”

An awkward silence settled over the room for a moment, then Docherty cleared her throat and said, “So the Doctor wants to take down the Master?”

The question was so obviously probing, but Martha pasted a clueless smile over her face and said, “Of course he does. But before we talk about that, I wondered if you knew anything about the Master that might be able to help him.”

Treating the collaborators as partners in the goal of defeating the Master was the fastest way to earn their trust.

Professor Docherty pulled a sheet of paper out of her desk. “Obviously the Archangel Network would seem to be the Master’s greatest weakness.”

Martha looked at the sheet with Tom, even though it wasn’t anything new to her.

Professor Docherty walked a few steps away from them. “Fifteen satellites all around the Earth, still transmitting. That’s why there’s so little resistance. It’s broadcasting a telepathic signal that keeps people scared.”

“We could just take them out,” Tom suggested.

“We could. Fifteen ground-to-air missiles.” Professor Docherty looked at him over her shoulder. “You got any on you? Besides, any military action, the Toclafane descend.”

Martha heaved a sigh. “They’re not called Toclafane. That’s a name the Master made up.”

Docherty turned back around to face them. “Then what are they, then?” she asked.

“That’s why I came to find you. Know your enemy.”

Martha saw the fear on the woman’s face and kept her own expression as open as possible.
Everything would fall apart if Professor Docherty suspected they knew she wasn’t loyal to the resistance.

She pulled a disk out of her pack. “I’ve got this. No one’s been able to look at a sphere close up. They can’t even be damaged, except once. A lightning strike in South Africa brought one of them down, just by chance. I’ve got the readings on this.”

Surprise and hope shone on the professor’s face as she reached for the disk. “Well then,” she said, pushing past them to get to her computer. “What are we waiting for?”

She slid the disk into the CD-ROM drive, and the computer made churning noises as it attempted to read the information. The professor banged the top of the monitor. “Oh, whoever thought we’d miss Bill Gates?”

“So is that why you travelled the world?” Tom asked while they waited for the computer to cooperate. “To find a disc?”

“No. Just got lucky.”

“I heard stories that you walked the Earth to find a way to build a weapon,” Professor Docherty said matter-of-factly.

Martha nodded curtly. That lie had never sat well with her, even though it had been her choice to run with it. The Doctor would never ask her to build a weapon, and she hated that she was giving the entire planet such a false impression of him.

“There!” the professor exclaimed, pulling Martha back to the present, and she looked down at the numbers scrolling across the monitor. “A current of fifty-eight point five kiloamperes transferred charge of five hundred and ten megajoules precisely.”

“Can you recreate that?” asked Tom.

“I think so. Easily. Yes.” The professor was smiling for the first time since they’d entered her workroom.

Martha grinned at Tom. “Right then, Dr. Milligan, we’re going to get us a sphere.”

oOoOoOoOo

It took the professor about thirty minutes to get the electric pulse rigged up. When it was ready, Martha gave Tom a handgun and sent him out amongst the rocket silos. A few minutes later, she heard the sharp report of three gunshots.

Martha stood at the intersection of the paths, waiting to catch a glimpse of Tom running towards them. When he turned a corner fifty feet away from her, Martha spun around and ran towards the professor, who was holding the controls for her electric pulse.

“He’s coming. You ready?”

“You do your job, I’ll do mine!” she retorted.

Tom rounded the corner and raced towards them. “Now!”

The sphere was caught in the electric field they’d set up between two silos. Electric pulses bolted into it, and after a moment, it fell to the ground. The electric field shut off, and Professor Docherty
unplugged her controls, to be on the safe side.

The three of them crept up on the sphere, hardly able to believe they could get this close to it safely. “That’s only half the job,” Professor Docherty said. “Let’s find out what’s inside.”

OoOooOoOo

The Doctor wiggled his fingers and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Hours had passed since he’d been chained to the wall, and any position that had been moderately comfortable at first had long since ceased to be.

But the boredom of being left alone on the flight deck was almost worse than the ache in his shoulders and numbness in his fingers. When the door slid open, he had to remind himself not to look too excited to see someone. He looked over casually and winced when he saw the vacant expression on Lucy Saxon’s face as she held her husband’s hand.

“Tomorrow, they launch,” the Master declared from the door. He walked slowly towards the Doctor, while Lucy hung onto the back of a chair. “We’re opening up a rift in the Braccatolian space. They won’t see us coming. It’s kind of scary.”

The Doctor rolled his eyes. “Then stop,” he suggested.

“Once the Empire is established, and there’s a new Gallifrey in the heavens, maybe then it stops.”

The Master stood directly in front of the Doctor. The shadow of pain in his eyes caught the Doctor’s attention, and he straightened slightly.

“The drumming. The never ending drumbeat. Ever since I was a child. I looked into the Vortex. That’s when it chose me. The drumming, the call to war. Can’t you hear it? Listen, it’s there now. Right now. Tell me you can hear it, Doctor. Tell me.”

The Doctor looked at his old friend. He’d sounded tormented when he started talking about the drums, but by the time he was done, the madness always lurking beneath the surface of the Master had seeped out. What had happened to him when he’d looked into the Untempered Schism? Why had it only happened to him?

The Doctor shook his head slightly. “It’s only you.”

The Master’s expression closed off, and took a step back and nodded curtly. “Good.”

Behind him, the door opened and a sphere flew in, spinning around in excitement. “Tomorrow, the war. Tomorrow we rise, never to fall.”

“You see?” The Master gestured at it. “I’m doing it for them. You should be grateful. After all, you love them so very, very much.”

The Doctor had been thinking about the Master’s earlier cryptic remark about the Toclafane all afternoon, and seeing the mocking in his eyes now, it finally fell into place. The paradox. The TARDIS that could only go to the end of the universe.

“You didn’t,” he hissed.

“Oh, but I did.”

It took every bit of restraint the Doctor possessed not to lash out at that. What the Master had done
was deplorable, and he’d done it in such a way that even after all of this was over, it would be impossible for the Doctor to undo it. The last remnant of humanity, searching for Utopia, only to be foiled by a madman.

oOoOoOoOo

They took the sphere back to the workshop, and Martha and Tom watched anxiously as Professor Docherty worked carefully to open it up.

“There’s some sort of magnetic clamp,” she said. “Hold on, I’ll just trip the—”

The sphere opened with the soft whooshing sound of a latch releasing. Professor Docherty dropped her tool and used her hands to open it the rest of the way, one quarter panel at a time.

“Oh my God!” she exclaimed, and Martha and Tom moved closer to take a look.

Sitting inside the sphere was a tiny, wizened head. For a moment, Martha thought it was dead, but then the eyes opened and they all jumped back a step.

“It’s alive,” Professor Docherty gasped.

“Martha. Martha Jones,” the face said.

Tom glanced over at her. “It knows you.”

“Sweet, kind Martha Jones. You helped us to fly.”

“What do you mean?” asked Martha, though she was afraid she already knew.

“You led us to salvation.”

“Who are you?”

“The skies are made of diamonds.”

“No.” Martha shook her head. She’d been prepared for the spheres to be the humans from Utopia, but not this—not Creet. “You can’t be him.”

“We share each other’s memories,” the former human said. “You sent him to Utopia.”

After the year she’d had, Martha hadn’t thought it was possible for her heart to break anymore. She was wrong.

“Oh, my God.”

It was too much. The whole bloody year had been too much, but she’d managed to push through, even as she lost almost every new friend she made. But this… Those humans at the end of the universe had represented hope that life would keep going. If they were the Master’s victims too, then what was left?

“What’s it talking about?” Tom asked. “What’s it mean?”

Professor Docherty looked down at the sphere-person. “What are they?”

Tom noticed she was almost in shock, and tried to get her attention. “Martha. Martha, tell us. What are they?”
Martha swallowed hard and nodded at the Master’s ultimate victory. “They’re us. They’re humans. The human race from the future.”
Back to the Beginning

Chapter Summary

This journey started one year and one day ago, on the flight deck of the Valiant. Today, it ends in the same place.

Martha took a deep breath and started to explain, not looking away from the creature in the sphere. “I’d sort of worked it out with the paradox machine, because the Doctor said, on the day before the Master came to power, he said he’d made it so his ship could only travel between London, 2008, and the year one hundred trillion. The Master had the TARDIS, this time machine, but the only other place he could go was the end of the universe, so he found Utopia.”

“Utopia isn’t a real place,” Professor Docherty said.

“The Utopia Project was the last hope.” Martha looked up at Professor Docherty and Tom. “Trying to find a way to escape the end of everything.”

“There was no solution, no diamonds.” All three of them looked back at the sphere. “Just the dark and the cold. But then the Master came with his wonderful time machine to bring us back home.”

“But that’s a paradox,” Professor Docherty said. “If you’re the future of the human race, and you’ve come back to murder your ancestors, you should cancel yourselves out. You shouldn’t exist.”

“And that’s the paradox machine,” Martha said matter-of-factly.

“But what about us?” asked Tom. “We’re the same species. Why do you kill so many of us?”

“Because it’s fun!” The former human cackled madly.

Tom took half a step back, pulled out his weapon, and shot the face.

oOoOoOoOo

The Master sat down and leaned back in his chair, tilting his head back to he could keep eye contact with the Doctor. “I took Lucy to Utopia. A Time Lord and his human companion. I took her to see the stars. Isn’t that right, sweetheart?”

Lucy swayed on her feet. “Trillions of years into the future, to the end of the universe.”

“Tell him what you saw,” the Master ordered quietly.

“Dying. Everything dying.”

The hair on the back of the Doctor’s neck stood up at the flat affect in Lucy’s voice. Even talking about the end of the universe and the death of creation didn’t elicit an emotional reaction from her.

Lucy stared at a point on the wall somewhere to the right of his shoulder. “The whole of creation was falling apart, and I thought, there’s no point. No point to anything. Not ever.”

The Master levelled a gaze at the Doctor. “And it’s all your fault.”
For once, the Doctor didn’t flinch at the accusation. So many things were his fault, but not this. He’d helped Professor Yana get the footprint engines working. He’d sent humanity to Utopia. If they’d been left to wander aimlessly instead, he knew exactly where that blame lay.

“You should have seen it, Doctor,” the Master said. “Furnaces burning. The last of humanity screaming at the dark.”

And of course it didn’t occur to you to offer help.

“All that human invention that had sustained them across the eons. It all turned inwards. They cannibalised themselves.”

“We made ourselves so pretty,” the sphere said in a young child’s voice.

The Master nodded slightly. “Regressing into children. But it didn’t work. The universe was collapsing around them.”

“You shouldn’t have done it, Master,” the Doctor said harshly, shifting his arms so the chains rattled a bit. “If you weren’t going to help them, you should have left them there, rather than cause a paradox by bringing them back here.”

“Oh, but that’s where the paradox machine comes in. My masterpiece, Doctor,” he said, his eyes glittering with madness and pride. “A living TARDIS, strong enough to hold the paradox in place, allowing the past and the future to collide in infinite majesty.”

The Doctor let his head thunk back against the wall, frustrated by the illogic of the Master’s actions. “But you’re changing history. Not just Earth, the entire universe.” The warped timelines made the Doctor ill, and he wondered how the Master could stand it.

“I’m a Time Lord,” the Master said coldly. “I have that right.”

The Doctor looked at the sphere. “But even then, why come all this way just to destroy?”

Lights flashed on the sphere. “We come backwards in time, all to build a brand new empire lasting one hundred trillion years.”

“With me as their Master.” The Master was trying to keep a straight face, but a smirk kept peeking out. “Time Lord and humans combined. Haven’t you always dreamt of that, Doctor?” He chuckled. “Oh, but of course you have—you don’t need to look any farther than your precious wife to see how much you loved the idea of Time Lords and humans mixing together.”

The Doctor’s fingers twitched, but with his arms chained above his head like this, he couldn’t clench them into fists. He had to settle for pressing his lips into a thin line and glaring at the Master.

The Master pushed his chair back and walked towards the Doctor. “I think I prefer my way of blending with humanity,” he whispered in the Doctor’s ear before turning towards the door.

“Take him back to his room for the night,” he ordered the guards as he left the flight deck.

Lucy looked at the Doctor, an unspoken plea in her eyes, before she followed the Master.

oOoOoOoOo

Professor Docherty blew out a loud breath. “Let’s go someplace more comfortable.” She led the way through the facility to a small room, furnished with not much more than a bed and an armchair.
Martha clenched her fists and then forced herself to relax. The hardest part was here—lying to a woman who’d done nothing wrong, save wanting to protect her son.

“Can I get you anything?” Docherty asked, gesturing to the small kitchenette. “I’m afraid I don’t have much, just cheap tea and instant coffee.”

Martha sank down onto the bed. “I’m fine.”

“I’ll take coffee,” Tom said.

They waited for the kettle to boil, then, once Tom and Professor Docherty both had their drinks, the professor settled down in the armchair and said, “I think it’s time we had the truth, Miss Jones. The legend says you’ve travelled the world to find a way of killing the Master. Tell us, is it true?”

Martha spoke without looking at her. “Just before I escaped, the Doctor told me how to do it.”

Those words electrified her audience. They started talking over the top of each other, asking how it could be done, and why she hadn’t done it yet.

“Hang on.” Martha stood up and carried her pack over to the kitchen counter. She pulled out the small case that held the decoy weapon. “The Doctor and the Master, they’ve been coming to Earth for years. And they’ve been watched. There’s UNIT and Torchwood, all studying Time Lords in secret. And they made this, the ultimate defence.”

She flipped the case open, letting them see the gun and the three vials.

Tom frowned when he saw the complicated weapon. “All you need to do is get close. I can shoot the Master dead with this.” He held his gun out.

The professor put a hand on his arm and forced him to lower the weapon. “Actually, you can put that down now, thank you very much.”

Martha didn’t look at either of them. “Point is, it’s not so easy to kill a Time Lord. They can regenerate. Literally bring themselves back to life.”

“Ah, the Master’s immortal. Wonderful,” Professor Docherty said sarcastically.

“Except for this.” Martha lifted the gun and blue vial out of the case. “Four chemicals, slotted into the gun. Inject him. Kills a Time Lord permanently.” She smiled at Tom as she set the vial down.

“Four chemicals?” he repeated, taking the vials from the case. “You’ve only got three.” He held them up.

Martha nodded. “Still need the last one, because the components of this gun were kept safe, scattered across the world, and I found them.” She took the vials from him and put them away, along with the gun, then closed the case. “San Diego, Beijing, Budapest, and London.”

“Then where is it?” he asked.

“There’s an old UNIT base, North London. I’ve found the access codes. Tom, you’ve got to get me there.”

“Well, let’s get going then.” Tom downed the last of his coffee and set the mug down with a hard thud, then led the way back to the workshop.

“We can’t get across London in the dark.” Tom and Martha grabbed their coats from the desk where
they’d left them. “It’s full of wild dogs. We’ll get eaten alive. We can wait till the morning, then go with the medical convoy.”

“You can spend the night here, if you like.”

Martha tried not to wince at the professor’s offer. It made her a little sick to think she’d gladly take her up on it if she didn’t know the other woman was a collaborator.

Tom answered for her. “No, we can get halfway, stay at the slave quarters in Bexley.”

Martha marvelled at the smooth way he passed the information.

He took the professor’s hand and shook it firmly. “Professor, thank you.”

Professor Docherty smiled up at him. “And you. Good luck.”

“Thanks.” On impulse, Martha leaned in and pressed a kiss to the woman’s cheek—a hint of affection she suspected the professor needed. Then she followed Tom, but Docherty’s voice stopped her at the door.

“Martha, could you do it?” Professor Docherty asked. “Could you actually kill him?”

Martha looked back at her. “I’ve got no choice.”

“You might be many things, but you don’t look like a killer to me.”

Rather than answer, Martha turned on her heel and walked past Tom, through the doors. He caught up with her at the lorry but didn’t say a word until they were miles away from the shipyard.

Then he laid a hand on her arm, and when she looked up at him, he simply said, “Good work.”

oOooOoOoO

Dodging the guards patrolling near the slave quarters was old hat to Martha, after a year of travelling and avoiding the Master’s minions. Tom led them to a mustard-coloured building and tapped lightly on the door.

“Let me in. It’s Milligan.” The door swung open almost immediately, and they quickly stepped inside before the guards could spot them.

Martha’s eyes swept over the cramped quarters, taking in the people lined up in the hallway, sitting on the stairs, finding a little bit of space to call their own, no matter how small it was. When she considered that this was what humanity had been reduced to, she thought that yes, she could kill the Master if the Doctor asked her to do it.

“Did you bring food?” a woman asked, hunger showing in the gaunt lines of her body.

“Couldn’t get any, and I’m starving,” Tom said.

“All we’ve got is water.”

Martha met the woman’s eyes. She’d thought Hooverville had taught her what poverty was, but it was nothing compared to this. That had been awful, but it was only a percentage of the population, and the world had come back from the bleakness of the Depression.

This… this was everyone, everywhere she went. No matter what colour their skin or what their
social status had been before, everyone on the entire planet had been reduced to slavery, serving at
the whim of the Master. In her darkest moments, Martha wondered if the Doctor had a clue what he
was dealing with. What good could a story do when people were literally starving to death?

Tom led her deeper into the house, and Martha inevitably stepped on toes as she shouldered her way
through. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s cheaper than building barracks,” he told her when they got to what would have been the living
room. “Pack them in, a hundred in each house, ferry them off to the shipyards every morning.”

“Are you Martha Jones?”

Martha turned around and looked at a young man, maybe sixteen. “Yeah, that’s me.”

“Can you do it? Can you kill him?” His words came faster and faster, spurred on by desperation.
“They said you can kill the Master, can you? Tell us you can do it. Please, tell us you can do it.”

“Who is the Master?” another voice asked, and then everyone started talking at once. It was a
familiar scene to Martha, but that didn’t make it any less overwhelming.

Tom’s voice carried above the din. “Come on, just leave her alone. She’s exhausted.”

“No, it’s all right.” Martha took a deep breath and shoved her own doubts back down where she’d
kept them hidden for twelve months. “They want me to talk, and I will.”

oOoOoOoOo

In his room, the Doctor lay stretched out on his back with his hands folded on his stomach so he
could rest his shoulders. They were so close, so very close to finally being able to stop the Master.

He tried to go over the details for the next day, but he couldn’t get past the knowledge that by this
time tomorrow, he would have Rose back.

His eyes shut and he imagined her as he’d seen her on the floor of that warehouse, her blonde hair
fanned out across the makeshift pillow he’d created by folding his coat up, the love tinged with
desperation in her eyes, the gentle touch of her hand running down his arm.

The Doctor clenched his hands into fists and rubbed them at his eyes. Blimey, he missed her.

He’d known, on a purely academic level, that losing the full marriage bond would be far worse than
what he’d experienced for those twelve hours after Canary Wharf. Practically, he hadn’t had a clue
how agonising it would be.

And he’d missed her before the Master found a way to completely suppress their bond. Her voice,
the way she’d look at him when she thought he was being exceptionally daft, the sound of her
laughter when he made her happy.

Less than twenty-four hours, he reminded himself, grabbing onto the slender thread of sanity that
thought promised.

The door slid open, letting light filter in from the corridor. The Doctor refused to look, but he heard
footsteps and a moment later, the Master was looking down at him, dressed in his suit even though it
was the middle of the night.

“Guess what?” he asked gleefully. The Doctor raised an eyebrow, and the Master laughed—almost
giggled. “I’m off on a retrieval mission. I was just told where I could find the faithful Martha Jones.”

The Doctor kept a stoic mask over his face. He hadn’t even considered how Martha would get back to the Valiant. He was fairly certain he’d told her that she needed to be on the ship when the paradox reversed—he had, hadn’t he?—but he’d left the how up to her.

“Your little plan has failed, Doctor.”

The Doctor looked at him in bemusement, and the Master laughed.

“A gun in four parts? I’m almost impressed. But no matter. It’ll all be taken care of tonight, and tomorrow, the war begins.”

oOoOoOoOo

Martha sat down in the narrow stairway, and the downtrodden citizens of London gathered around her. “I travelled across the world,” she began, thinking about her year, “from the ruins of New York to the fusion mills of China, right across the radiation pits of Europe. And everywhere I went, I saw people just like you, living as slaves.”

She looked around at her audience as she spoke, but there was almost no reaction. Tired, empty eyes looked back at her, and she wanted to cry when she remembered the fire people had still possessed when she had visited France.

“But if Martha Jones became a legend, then that’s wrong, because my name isn’t important. There’s someone else. The man who sent me out there. The man who told me to walk the Earth. And his name is the Doctor. He has saved your lives so many times, and you never even knew he was there. He never stops. He never stays. He never asks to be thanked. But I’ve seen him. I know him.” She looked slowly around the room, and a faint light of hope shone in a few eyes. “And I know what he can do.”

There was a commotion in the front of the house, and a bedraggled woman pushed her way through the crowd. “It’s him! It’s him! Oh my God, it’s him! It’s the Master. He’s here.”

Even though this was part of her plan, Martha still couldn’t stop the instinctive recoil. Her reaction was nothing compared to the panic of the slaves though.

“But he never comes to Earth,” said the teen who’d asked if she could kill him. “He never walks upon the ground.”

“Hide her!” the woman said, pointing at Martha.

Tom tossed a jacket over the top of the crowd. “Use this.”

Martha allowed herself to be hidden for the moment. From beneath the jacket, she heard someone cock a weapon and guessed that was probably Tom—it seemed unlikely that anyone who lived in these slave quarters would own a weapon.

“He walks among us, our lord and Master,” the boy said, his voice awed.

“Martha. Martha Jones,” a familiar voice sang out. “I can see you! Out you come, little girl. Come and meet your Master.”

The inhabitants of the house all quivered in fear, and Martha gathered up her courage for what she knew she needed to do. The hardest part, honestly, would be convincing these people to let her go to
him.


That was the cue she’d been waiting for. There was only one thing the Doctor would do in this situation, and the Master knew it as well as she did.

Martha fumbled with her key, nerves making her clumsy, but she finally managed to take it off. Once it was tucked away into her pocket, she pushed the jacket back, stood up, and made her way down the stairs.

Tom looked at her uncomprehendingly when she put a hand on his gun and gently pushed it out of the way. She held his gaze, hoping he at least would understand that this was all part of the plan. She saw when it clicked, and he stepped out of her way so she could exit the house.

The Master started clapping when he saw her. “Oh, yes. Oh, very well done. Good girl. He trained you well.” He grinned, clearly expecting a response.

When she refused to give it to him, his fake approval disappeared and he reached into his coat. “Bag. Give me the bag.” Martha took another step towards him. “No, stay there. Just throw it.”

Martha took her backpack off and threw it towards the Master, hoping she looked reluctant and resentful enough as she did it. A single shot of the laser screwdriver was all it took to set the bag and its contents on fire.

“And now, good companion, your work is done.”

She didn’t have time to react to the screwdriver being pointed at her before a voice distracted them both. “No!”

Martha turned in time to watch the Master fire the laser screwdriver at Tom, instead of her. She watched in horror. Tom hadn’t known what she had, that the Master wouldn’t kill her down here because he’d want the Doctor to watch. And because he hadn’t known, he’d died.

The Master laughed. “But you, when you die, the Doctor should be witness, hmm? Almost dawn, Martha, and planet Earth marches to war.”

oOoOoOoOo

At half seven the next morning, the Doctor was pulled from his room by two guards and chained back to the wall in the flight deck. He had plenty of company; Martha’s family and Jack were all escorted in and held at gunpoint.

The Master stood at the head of the conference table and clasped his hands together. “The day has finally arrived. Today, the rockets launch and the spheres fly, and the new Time Lord Empire will begin. And you—the Doctor and his associates—will get to witness it first hand.”

Lucy sat at the table, wearing the same red formal dress she’d worn the day before. Her vacant smile concerned the Doctor, but it seemed to please her husband, who cooed at her, then offered her a hand and led her to the bridge.

At 07:55, he picked up the horn, then looked down at the Doctor. “Are you ready, Doctor? You are about to discover why they call me the Master.”
**Only a master of evil, Darth.** The quote almost spilled from the Doctor’s lips, but he managed to hold it back. Not that the Master would have heard it, since he turned the comm on and broadcast a general announcement to the planet.

“Citizens of Earth, rejoice and observe.”

The doors opened, and two more guards shoved Martha into the room. She glanced over at her family, then at Jack, and finally at the Doctor as she walked slowly towards the Master. The sympathy in her eyes suggested she’d heard about Rose.

The Master held his hand out. “Your teleport device, in case you thought I’d forgotten.”

Martha took the Vortex manipulator from her cargo pockets and tossed it to the Master, who caught it handily.

The Master started to speak, then looked as if he’d just remembered something. “Oh, but wait,” he said. “There’s someone else I want to witness this moment.” He nodded to the guard by the door, and Rose was led into the room.

The Doctor’s gaze swept over Rose, taking in the minor changes to her appearance. Her light brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail that was still blonde where the ends brushed against her back. Her face was a little thinner and there were circles under her eyes, but all of that was forgotten when he looked in her brown eyes and saw the familiar love shining out at him.

“I’m afraid I wasn’t quite honest,” the Master said. “I didn’t actually kill Rose Tyler; I simply fitted her with a telepathic dampening field that has made her… unreachable.”

The Doctor noticed the choker she wore then. His hands clenched into fists when he spotted the little flashing light—of course the Master had booby-trapped the device he’d used to suppress their bond; Rose would have just taken it off, otherwise. But that thought opened the door on all the possibilities he tried not to think about, possibilities of what the Master might have done to her in the last five months.

It was so tempting to reach for her telepathically, to ask her if she was truly as okay as she appeared to be. But he couldn’t afford to be incapacitated by a migraine today, so he locked that impulse down as tightly as he could. In less than an hour, this entire year would be rewritten. Then, hopefully, he could get that collar off of her and their bond would come back. He could wait an hour.

Rose tilted her head as she returned his rapid assessment. When her gaze reached his clenched fists, the slight furrow on her forehead smoothed away, and he realised his tenseness had confused her. Her eyes returned to his, and the smile on her face eased his fears—for the moment, at least. The Doctor grinned back and wiggled his fingers in greeting.

The entire exchange took less than a minute, but apparently that was too long for the Master’s liking. “Do you mind?” he said. “This is supposed to be my moment of triumph, and your smiling is ruining it.”

Rose snorted and looked back at the Master, and he motioned for her to stand by Martha. “And now, kneel.” The women obeyed, but while Martha took a subservient posture with her head bowed, Rose tossed her ponytail back over her shoulder and looked the Master in the eye.

The Master clenched his jaw. “Feisty to the last, Miss Tyler.”

“Never take your eyes off a snake, Harry.”
The Doctor tapped his knuckles against the wall behind him. That two-line exchange had the dual effect of making him ridiculously proud of his bond mate, and bringing back all his fears about what the last year had been like for her.

The Master tossed his screwdriver in the air and caught it without looking. “Down below, the fleet is ready to launch. Two hundred thousand ships set to burn across the universe.” He tapped a button on the comms. “Are we ready?”

“The fleet awaits your signal,” a man answered. “Rejoice!”

“Three minutes to align the black hole converters.” The Master pushed a button on his watch, and the digital display on the wall started ticking down the seconds. “Counting down. I never could resist a ticking clock. My children, are you ready?” he asked the spheres.

Billions of voices answered in unison. “We will fly and blaze and slice. We will fly and blaze and slice.”

“At zero, to mark this day, Martha Jones and Rose Tyler will die.”

“Like hell they will,” the Doctor growled. He tugged uselessly on his chains, heedless of anything but the overpowering fear of losing Rose again.

The Master raised an eyebrow and laughed at him. “How exactly do you plan to stop me, Doctor? Your hands are tied at the moment, quite literally.”

The Master’s goading reminded the Doctor of his plan. He relaxed back against the wall and took a few breaths, managing to slow his heart rates back to normal.

Confusion crossed the Master’s face, but after a moment, he shrugged and looked at Martha and Rose again. He pointed the screwdriver at them. “Bow your heads.”

Rose and Martha bowed their heads, but the Doctor saw faint smiles on both of their faces.

“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—”

Martha laughed quietly, but it caught the Master’s attention. “What?” he demanded. “What’s so funny?”

Martha and Rose both looked up at him. “A gun,” Martha said incredulously.

The Master shrugged. “What about it?”

“A gun in four parts?”

The Doctor had been baffled by this reference the night before, until he realised this must have been the cover story Martha devised to explain why she was travelling around the world.

A hint of understanding crossed Rose’s face, and she grinned at the Master, which only drove him crazier.

“Yes, and I destroyed it.”

The clock kept ticking, and the Doctor felt a faint buzz of energy over his skin as people started a little early.
“A gun in four parts scattered across the world?” Martha said. “I mean, come on, did you really believe that?”

The Master blinked. “What do you mean?”

“As if he would ask her to kill,” Rose said derisively. “Really, Harry.”

The Master looked over at the Doctor, then back at Rose and Martha. “Oh well, it doesn’t matter. I’ve got you all exactly where I want you.”

“But I knew what Professor Docherty would do,” Martha told him. “The Resistance knew about her son. I told her about the gun, so she’d get me here at the right time.”

“Oh, but you’re still going to die,” the Master insisted, holding onto the control he thought he had over the situation.

“Don’t you want to know what I was doing, travelling the world?” asked Martha.

The Master heaved a sigh and rolled his eyes. “Tell me,” he said and flopped down on the steps.

Watching his companion face the Master with conviction and confidence in her voice filled the Doctor with pride. After a year of telling his story everywhere she went, this time, she told her own.

“I told a story, that’s all. No weapons, just words. I did just what the Doctor said. I went across the continents all on my own. And everywhere I went, I found the people, and I told them my story. I told them about the Doctor. And I told them to pass it on, to spread the word so that everyone would know about the Doctor.”

The Master leaned forward. “Faith and hope? Is that all?”

“No, because I gave them an instruction, just as the Doctor said.” Martha stood up, and Rose followed her lead. Around them, the atmosphere in the room was electric. “I told them that if everyone thinks of one word, at one specific time—”

“Nothing will happen,” the Master interrupted as he got to his feet. “Is that your weapon? Prayer?”

Martha continued as if she hadn’t been interrupted. “Right across the world, one word, just one thought at one moment but with fifteen satellites.”

The dawning comprehension on the Master’s face was almost amusing. “What?”

“The Archangel Network,” Jack said, and it didn’t surprise the Doctor that he’d figured out part of the plan.

Martha wrapped up her explanation. “A telepathic field binding the whole human race together, with all of them, every single person on Earth, thinking the same thing at the same time. And that word is ‘Doctor.’”

The shackles on the Doctor’s wrists and ankles glowed white, but they didn’t burn him. He held the Master’s gaze while he waited for the chains to dissolve.

“Stop it,” the Master ordered. “No, no, no, no, you don’t.”

Everyone in the room, except for the guards, was whispering his name. Even Rose, whose special collar didn’t allow her to connect to the satellites.
“Don’t,” the Master ordered uselessly. Everyone continued to whisper the Doctor’s name, but the Master ignored them, staring at the Doctor instead as he jumped around the bridge. “Stop this right now. Stop it!”

“I’ve had a whole year to tune myself into the psychic network and integrate with its matrices,” the Doctor said as his right hand became free.

“I order you to stop!”

The Doctor’s other hand was free now, and the psychic energy of four billion people all thinking his name at once had created a force shield around him. “The one thing you can’t do. Stop them thinking.”

The shackles on his ankles dissolved, and the chains clanked to the floor. The energy swirling around the Doctor raised him up to the level of the bridge, and he looked the Master straight in the eye.

“Tell me the human race is degenerate now, when they can do this.”

“No!” The Master fired his laser screwdriver at the Doctor, but the psychic energy still protected him.

What was more, the interference with Archangel broke the last telepathic hold the Master had on the people. As the Doctor had planned a year ago, everyone in the room could see the Master as he really was. Rose looked around the room and saw guards lowering their weapons when they realised who they’d been working for.

“I’m afraid your reign is over, Master,” the Doctor said as he hovered in mid-air.

“Then I’ll kill her for real this time.” The Master pointed his laser screwdriver at Rose.

The Doctor’s lips curled back in a snarl, and the feral growl that escaped through his bared teeth sent a shiver down Rose’s back. Looking at him now, she could understand why Lucy’s fear had outweighed her self-preservation enough to risk telling him that Rose was alive.

He stretched his hand out, and the screwdriver flew out of the Master’s hand.

“You can’t do this.” The Master shoved his hands through his hair as he stumbled down the stairs to the far side of the bridge. “You can’t do it. It’s not fair!”

“Fair?” The Doctor barked out a laugh, his eyes still wild. “When have you ever cared about fairness? Specifically, what in the last two and a half years did you do because it was fair?”

The energy around him carried him towards the Master, dropping him down gently on the other side of the flight deck, where the Master cowered against the bulkhead.

“Was it fair to delete the flight plan from the rocket bound to Utopia and then use those poor people’s broken minds for your own twisted purpose? Or to brainwash the people of Great Britain into voting for you for Prime Minister, only to enslave them, along with the rest of humanity?”

The Doctor’s voice was getting louder with every word. Rose stepped around Martha to stand beside him and put a hand on his shoulder, hoping to calm him. It was hard, without the bond, but finally, she felt him take a deep breath.

His calm was an illusion, though. A moment later, he crouched down and spat the next sentence out in the Master’s face. “Was it fair to make me think you’d killed my wife, to make us both suffer the
pam of a broken marriage bond?"

“My children,” the Master whispered.

The Doctor leapt to his feet. “Captain, the paradox machine!” he ordered Jack.

“You men, with me!” Jack ordered, pointing to Greg and another guard. “You stay here,” he told the rest as they ran from the room.

Rose watched the Master carefully as he glared at the Doctor’s back. He’d forgotten she was there, which meant he didn’t bother to conceal his motions when he reached into his jacket pocket to retrieve the Vortex manipulator.

Her muscles had lost their tone after a year without exercise, and her body was weak following five months of contending with the huon particles. However, the element of surprise made up for the strength she lacked when she kicked the Vortex manipulator out of his hands.

“Leaving so soon, Harry?” she said sweetly. “But you were the one who invited us here!”

The Doctor, who’d spun back around when he heard the Vortex manipulator skitter across the deck, smiled brilliantly at her.

“I’m afraid, Master,” he said nonchalantly, “that you’ve fallen victim to one of the classic blunders.” Rose snorted at the reference. “Never underestimate Rose Tyler.”

“Oh, but I’ve got this.” The Master straightened and took off his watch. “Black hole converter inside every ship. If I can’t have this world, Doctor, then neither can you. We shall fly above this Earth together and watch it burn below us.”

Alarms sounded around the ship, and Martha flew up to the bridge and checked the displays. “We have all six billion spheres heading right for us!”

Getting rid of the paradox machine would take care of them, though, so the three Time Lords ignored her.

The Doctor shook his head at the Master. “Weapon after weapon after weapon. All you do is talk and talk and talk.”

The Master slumped, the hand holding the watch falling limply at his side. Rose watched as the Doctor took slow steps towards him, talking all the while.

“But over all these years and all these disasters, I’ve always had the greatest secret of them all. I know you. Explode those ships, you kill yourself. That’s the one thing you can never do.” The Doctor held his hand out. “Give that to me.”

The Master looked down at the device, then handed it over to the Doctor, who took it from him just before the ship started shaking violently.

“Everyone get down!” he ordered. “Time is reversing!”

Rose lost her footing, but the Doctor caught her before she could hit the ground. He pulled them both to the deck and curled himself around her protectively.

“I love you,” the Doctor breathed in her ear as the ship rocked back and forth.

Rose looked up at him, hardly able to believe he was right there with her. “I love you, too. Finish this
up so you can fix this, yeah?” she said pointing at her neck.

The Doctor scowled at the collar, and Rose laced her fingers through his and brought his hand to her mouth to kiss his knuckles. “You can take care of it, right?”

His scowl melted away, and he brushed her hair back over her ear. “Oh, yes,” he promised.

Wind picked up inside the ship—not something you see every day. Rose’s time senses went hazy as her limited knowledge of history from the last year was archived, for lack of a better way to put it. Japan and those other things… had never happened.

The events in her own life remained crystal clear, however, and Rose pressed her lips into a thin line. It would have been nice to only have vague memories of the year on the Valiant, of meeting the Master and losing her bond to the Doctor.

The shaking stopped abruptly, and the Doctor looked around carefully, making sure that was the last of it. Then he realised his time senses answered that for him—they were back to where they’d started.

He stood up carefully, then helped Rose up once he was certain the turbulence was over. He hugged her quickly before taking the stairs to the bridge two at a time. “The paradox is broken,” he said as he checked the controls. “We’ve reverted back, one year and one day. Two minutes past eight in the morning.”

He moved to the comms station and turned the horn on. “This is UNIT Central. What’s happened up there? We just saw the President assassinated.”

The Doctor nodded; as he’d expected. “Just after the President was killed, but just before the spheres arrived. Everything back to normal. Planet Earth restored. None of it happened. The rockets, the terror. It never was.”

“What about the spheres?” Martha asked.

The Doctor kept his gaze fixed on the Master, who was trying to get to his feet and looking a little shaky. “Trapped at the end of the universe,” he said, in answer to Martha’s question.

“But I can remember it,” Francine protested, confusion and bitterness colouring her words.

The Doctor turned to look at her as he offered his explanation. “We’re at the eye of the storm. The only ones who’ll ever know.”

They all heard a loud thud, followed by a groan. The Doctor turned around and grinned when he saw Rose standing over the Master, who lay splayed out on the floor.

“Come on, Harry,” she taunted. “How many times are we going to do this bit where you try to run away and I stop you?” She looked at the guards by the door. “Cuffs,” she demanded.

Jack walked in just as she flipped the Master over onto his stomach and cuffed his hands behind his back. “Oh, I see how it is,” he complained. “You send me to take care of the paradox machine so you can play with handcuffs.”

“Jack.” To the Doctor’s delight, Rose chastised their friend along with him.

“Right. Sorry.” Jack looked at the Time Lord now sitting inelegantly with his back against the ship’s hull and yanked him to his feet. “So, what do we do with this one?”
Behind him, the Jones family spoke up quickly, but their answers weren’t acceptable. “We kill him,” Clive said first.

“We execute him,” Tish agreed.

The Doctor knew he was supposed to tell them they couldn’t do that, but looking down at the smirk on the Master’s face, he couldn’t force the words past his lips. This was the man who had killed Rose—no, not killed her, just let him think she was dead. And who knows what he’s done to her since then?

He opened his mouth, but his anger made his throat close up, and even though he moved his lips, no words came out.

In the end, it was Rose who said, “No, that’s not the solution.”

*Then what is the solution, Rose?* The demand was on the tip of his tongue, and he barely choked it back.

All questions were deferred when he heard the distinctive sound of a gun’s safety being removed. He looked down from the bridge and saw Francine holding a gun on the Master.

“Oh, I think so.” Her hands shook slightly, and she took a shuddering breath.

In his peripheral vision, the Doctor spotted Rose moving slowly towards Francine. He tried to catch her eye, to convince her to let him approach the hysterical woman, but she didn’t look at him once. Afraid of what Francine would do if she heard two sets of footsteps moving her way, he was forced to watch instead.

“Because all those things, they still happened because of him.” Francine’s voice wavered. “I saw them.”

Madness glinted in the Master’s eyes. “Go on. Do it.”

Rose’s quiet voice broke the tableau. “Francine, you’re better than him.”

Francine pressed her lips together, but she couldn’t restrain a strangled sob. Rose reached for her slowly, pushing her hands down and knocking the gun to the floor.

Martha shoved past the Doctor to reach her mum, and Rose let her take over comforting Francine.

The Doctor released a breath he hadn’t realised he was holding, and his knees went weak for a moment. He suspected he would be even more protective of Rose than usual for a while, until he got past the constant fear of losing her again. Rose smiled up at him, and he nodded slightly.

“You still haven’t answered the question,” the Master pointed out, interrupting their silent conversation. “What happens to me?”

The Doctor left the bridge. “I’m sure UNIT has a nice cell someplace where they can keep you, until your regenerations run out.” He crossed his arms and stared at the Master. “Their headquarters are located in the Tower of London, after all.”

“You’re just going to… lock me up?” the Master stammered, his nose wrinkled in disgust.

“What did you expect, Master?” the Doctor snapped. “An open hand and a welcome onto my ship, when *you killed my wife*?” He took a deep breath. “I won’t let you die when you’re the only other
Gallifreyan in existence, but that doesn’t mean I have to let you be part of our life.”

The Master smirked. “That’s the only thing keeping you from doing it, isn’t it, Doctor?” He tipped his head back insolently. “You would kill me yourself for what I did to your precious Rose, if it wasn’t for the fact of my genetic code.”

“Oh, all you did was give me a fancy bit of jewellery,” Rose retorted. “Quit trying to rile the Doctor up.”

The Master’s gaze flickered over to Rose, and the Doctor bit back a laugh at the consternation in his eyes. He still didn’t speak, though, and the Master’s taunt lingered in the air between them, despite Rose’s attempt to dispel the tension.

Would he kill the Master, if it wouldn’t leave him once again the last of the Time Lords from Gallifrey? All the bitterness he’d kept locked down for the last year swirled through him, and there was a large part of him that wanted to kill the Master anyway.

Rose took his hand, and he jumped a little—it had been a long time since she’d been able to sneak up on him like that. But her hand in his gave him strength, just like it always did. He shook his head. “That’s not the way I do things.”

The gunshot took them all by surprise. The Doctor looked towards the sound and saw Lucy Saxon, pale, frightened, and angry, holding the gun Francine had discarded. His head swivelled in the opposite direction, just in time to watch the Master slump onto the deck.

“Put it down,” Jack ordered Lucy.

The Doctor walked over to the Master and knelt at his side. The Master’s face contorted in pain, his mouth working as he gasped for breath. “Always the women.”

“I didn’t see her,” the Doctor said truthfully.

“Are you happy now, Doctor?” The Master grunted. “You can watch me die, and you didn’t have to pull the trigger yourself.”

The Doctor frowned down at him, a little disturbed by how accurate that was. “You’re not dying,” he said curtly. “Don’t be stupid. It’s only a bullet. Just regenerate.”

Victory shone in the Master’s eyes. “No.”

Rose knelt down beside him. “Don’t you remember what I told you, Master?” The Master looked at her, but his eyes refused to focus. “It doesn’t need to be like this. You could come with us, and maybe eventually the Doctor could find a way to get the drums to stop.”

The Doctor bit back a protest. He did not want the Master anywhere near his TARDIS or his Rose.

But the Master didn’t seem inclined to take her up on the offer, anyway. “I didn’t want to spend the rest of my lives tied to you before; what makes you think I’ve changed my mind?”

“It’s only the two of you left, though,” Rose argued. “He’s got me, but the two of you have known each other for so long.”

The Master’s lips twisted into a pained, vindictive smile. “How about that? I win.” He grunted, and swallowed hard. “Will it stop, Doctor? The drumming. Will it stop?” He drew one last rasping breath, then his eyes closed.
The Doctor stared down at the limp body in his arms. There was a time when the Master had been one of his closest friends, when his death would have sent him into shattering grief. Even a year ago, he would have been devastated to find another Time Lord, only to lose him again. But with Rose beside him and yet not in his head, the only thing the Doctor could think was that the person responsible for all the pain and anguish of the last five months was dead.

Rose wrapped her arm around his waist and rested her head on his shoulder. With the Master’s death, the only presence in his head was the weakened TARDIS, and suddenly, the emptiness was unbearable. He had to get them out of here so he could take care of their bond, but they couldn’t just disappear—there were things that had to be done first.

The Doctor jumped up, letting the body of his friend-turned-foe slide to the deck. “Captain, have a guard carry the Master’s body to the TARDIS infirmary,” he ordered.

“Yes, sir!” Jack said as the Doctor raced up the steps to the bridge. He settled in at the comms station and picked up the horn. UNIT was still demanding answers, and the faster they got here to take care of the fallout, the faster he and Rose could go home.
Jack returned to the flight deck only minutes after two UNIT choppers full of soldiers landed on the Valiant, ready to handle the investigation and make arrests. The Doctor spotted him weaving his way through the crowd of people and walked forward to meet him, with Rose by his side.

“I did a few repairs in the console room while I was there,” Jack told them, which explained the new layer of grease on his hands. “She’ll still need work, but she should be flyable now—which is a definite improvement.”

“Thank you, Jack,” the Doctor said sincerely. He reached out to shake his friend’s hand, but instead, received a shopping bag.

“Those are your personal effects. Greg managed to find where the Master had hidden them away.”

“My coat!” the Doctor exclaimed, pulling it out of the bag and slipping it on. It didn’t match his boring grey suit, but he felt much more like himself with the familiar weight brushing against his ankles. “Janis Joplin gave me this coat.”

Rose nudged him in the side with her elbow. “Yes, I think we all know that, Doctor.”

Jack stepped back, a half-smile on his face. “Anyway, I imagine you’ve got some business to take care of. Just don’t leave Martha and me alone here for too long.”

“We’ll be back in an hour,” the Doctor promised.

“And no more,” Rose agreed.

Jack nodded, and the Doctor led Rose off of the flight deck, following the healthier-sounding hum of the TARDIS to where she’d been in storage for the last year. They were almost there when a UNIT officer stopped them.

The Doctor rolled his eyes when the captain snapped him a smart salute. “Oh, don’t—don’t do that, Captain Magambo,” he told her, reading her name off her shirt.

The captain lowered her hand hesitantly, and he heard Rose cough to hide her snort of amusement.

After a moment, Captain Magambo settled into parade rest, with her hands folded behind her back. “Is there anything you can tell us about what happened during the year on the Valiant?” she asked.

The Doctor tugged on his ear. “Some of the guards weren’t actually working with the Master,” he said. “Jack Harkness can tell you which ones, and anything else you need to know.”
Captain Magambo blinked up at him. “You’re not staying?”

The Doctor attempted a cheeky smile. “You clearly haven’t heard about my penchant for avoiding paperwork,” he quipped.

Two soldiers walked by, leading Lucy Saxon away in handcuffs, and Rose said, “Make sure she gets as lenient a sentence as possible. The Master spent the last year abusing her mentally and emotionally, and she just finally cracked.”

The words triggered all the fears the Doctor had been struggling with since he’d realised Rose was alive. What else had happened to Rose after the Master had broken their bond? In his desperation, he reached for her without thinking, then groaned as the clawing pain in his head turned into a sharp ice pick behind his eyes.

Rose looked up at him, then back at the soldier. “Unless there’s something more you absolutely need us for, we’ll take off now.”

The woman shook her head and snapped another salute, and the Doctor allowed Rose to take him gently by the hand and lead him away from the officer.

“Where is she?” Rose asked in a low voice.

“Just keep going. I'll tell you when to turn.”

Following the Doctor’s directions, they soon reached the same small storage room they’d found the TARDIS in a year ago. Rose blinked back the tears that came to her eyes when she saw the familiar blue box and rummaged in the bag Jack had given the Doctor for the key.

She looked around the room nervously as she slid the key into the lock. She almost expected the Master to jump out from behind the crates and yell, “Gotcha!” as if this had all been an elaborate ruse on his part, to make them think they’d won and made it home. But no one stopped them when she opened the door, and Rose finally believed they were free of him.

The last time Rose had been in the TARDIS, the light had been all wrong—red with danger and pain. Today, the time rotor glowed its typical blue-green, and the warm coral walls looked healthy, rather than sickly.

The Doctor closed the door and slung his coat over a strut. “Let’s go into the Vortex, so we can take all the time we need before coming back to pick Jack and Martha up,” he suggested.

Rose nodded, and stepped up to the side of the console she typically worked when they flew her together. Hopping into the Vortex was easy, but you did have to adjust every dial.

“Ready,” she told him a moment later, and he threw the lever.

Flying the TARDIS without being able to talk to her was like… driving without being able to see. Standing in the console room and yet not hearing the ship’s telepathic hum, Rose was desperate to get the collar off.

“Come on,” the Doctor said quietly. “She’s moved the study so it’s just off the console room.”

Rose grabbed the bag of their belongings and followed the Doctor to the study. “Thank you, dear,” Rose said, patting the doorframe as they stepped inside. The lights flickered, and Rose smiled at the TARDIS’ way of communicating, even when they couldn’t actually talk.
She tugged the Doctor down onto the couch beside her and handed him the sonic. “Take it off, Doctor,” she begged. “Please… I need…”

“Yes,” he whispered. “So do I.” He adjusted the setting and pointed the device at Rose. “Let’s see what kind of lock we’re dealing with first,” he said, scanning the collar. His face brightened when he saw the results. “Oh, that’s simple,” he said, his nimble fingers turning the controls.

The Doctor held the screwdriver up, then looked seriously at Rose. “Are you ready, love? This will probably be a little overwhelming—like getting your sight back after being blind for five months.”

Rose nodded her head quickly and took the Doctor’s free hand. “Don’t care. I’ll deal with it if it is.”

He nodded, then thumbed the control on the sonic. The lock popped open, and the Doctor dropped his tool to pull the collar off of her.

Rose’s head swam under the onslaught of thoughts and emotions sweeping over her. The TARDIS was humming joyfully, happy to have her Wolf and her Thief back where they belonged.

And the Doctor…

Their bond snapped back to life the moment the collar was removed, and she could feel every bit of love, and relief, and elation he felt at being reunited with her. His pain and anger over their forced separation were almost as potent, but Rose carefully directed his focus to the positive.

A strangled sob from the Doctor was the only warning she had before he hauled her into his arms and then stretched out on the couch with her lying beside him. A moment later, she felt a hesitant knocking in her mind, and Rose had to fight her own anger when she realised he was asking permission to enter. It was a purely symbolic gesture, but she hated the idea that he would doubt she wanted him.

Concentrating on the bond, she deepened their connection, letting her mind rest against his as closely as he held her physically. After five months without him, it felt slightly unnatural, like slipping into shoes that hadn’t been worn in a long time. But the relief from the emptiness they’d both felt so keenly more than made up for any temporary discomfort. Rose held him close, both physically and telepathically, and projected as much love and welcome as she could over the bond. The worst of the ache faded gradually, and they both sighed in relief at the realisation that they were truly together again.

When the swirl of emotions settled somewhat, Rose’s head was resting on the Doctor’s shoulder and his fingers were tangled in her hair. She tilted her head back and pressed a kiss to his Adam’s apple, followed by one to his jawline.

The Doctor hummed his approval, then shifted and tilted his head so her next kiss could reach his lips. Rose smiled at the silent request and ran a hand through his hair as she kissed him gently.

I missed you, my Doctor, she told him as their mouths parted and met again. I missed you so much.

He gasped against her lips, then deepened the kiss, moving against her hungrily. Rose. Oh, love. Those months when I thought I’d lost you forever…

Rose stroked his face tenderly. But you didn’t, Doctor, she reminded him. I’m right here. We’re together in our home.

She felt the emotions break inside him seconds before the first tear fell. Although the last five months had left her telepathy rusty, she managed to cradle his mind close to hers while he wept against her
shoulder, soaking her shirt through.

It wasn’t until she felt his long fingers tenderly wipe the tears from her own face that Rose realised she was crying, too. “Do you want to talk about it?” he asked gently.

Rose shook her head and pressed herself closer to the Doctor. But when he started running his fingers through her hair, the words tumbled from her mouth without any conscious thought from her.

“He put that collar on me, and then I couldn’t feel anything. You were gone, and that was the worst. But the Master was standing right in front of me, and I couldn’t tell he existed telepathically. It was like I’d been blinded, like you said.”

She swallowed hard. “And the TARDIS. I… losing her… It wasn’t like losing you, or it was almost exactly like that, but different? I can’t even explain it.” She shrugged. “And of course, I’ve been running on fumes for the last five months, not having her help dealing with the huon particles.”

The ship hummed apologetically, and Rose shook her head.

“It wasn’t your fault, old girl. You couldn’t even tell I was still alive—how were you supposed to do anything?”

“It hurt her, too,” the Doctor broke in. “The bond between a TARDIS and her pilot is similar to a marriage bond in that it’s integral to who both of you are.”

Rose hated to think that her own condition had caused the ship even more pain than she’d already been in. It was the TARDIS’ turn to reassure her this time, making it clear that what mattered most was that they were together again—all three of them.

She rarely paid much attention to her connection to the ship, usually taking it for granted, but today, she closed her eyes and focused on the gold thread that linked them. The image of a wolf howling came to mind, and Rose hummed her agreement.

“We are the Bad Wolf,” she whispered, then opened her eyes when the Doctor sucked in a breath. “What?”

He rubbed at his forehead. “I’ll never be fully comfortable with that,” he admitted. “Not that you have a closer connection with our ship than I do—that I honestly love. But the memory of what you did to bond with her, of what it did to you…”

Rose propped herself up on her elbow. “Is there anything of me in the TARDIS?” she wondered. “Like, she left the huon particles in me—is there anything of Rose in her? Or does this all go one way?”

“One way, and one time only,” the Doctor said firmly. “I see the ideas lurking in your mind, Rose Tyler, but please remember, merging with the TARDIS killed you once.”

Timelines shimmered around Rose. The Doctor was wrong. It wasn’t merging with the TARDIS that had killed her; it was taking in the Vortex. If one could be done without the other…

“Rose, please!”

The Doctor had moved into a half-sitting position and gripped her shoulder hard. Rose looked into his frantic eyes and felt a twinge of guilt. Of course he was terrified. He’d just got her back from the dead, basically, and here she was, obviously contemplating a dangerous course of action.

“It’s okay, Doctor,” she promised, reaching out and running a hand through his hair. “I’m not gonna do anything stupid. Just… sometimes I wonder exactly how close me and her are, y’know?”
He blew out a shaky breath. “Yes, fine. Wonder all you like. But promise me you won’t look into the Time Vortex again. Please.”

Rose glanced at the timelines once more, then smiled at him. “I promise, Doctor.”

They took a few minutes to shower and dress in their own clothes, and then the Doctor flew them to a deserted beach overshadowed by a cliff.

Together, they built a pyre and laid the Master’s body on it. Then Rose watched him light it on fire and took his hand when he stepped back.

“I’ll never light another pyre like this again.”

Rose looked up at him. He was still staring at the fire, but his eyes were glassy, like he was holding back tears. “What do you mean?”

“He was…” The Doctor swallowed. “This was the Gallifreyan funerary custom. Without any others left, I won’t have a reason to do this again.”

They were silent for a long moment as the fire crackled around the Master’s body. The Doctor’s grief and anger raged internally, and Rose waited for him to break.

The Doctor kicked at the sand. “Why do I even care?” His hands clenched into fists, and he took half a step towards the pyre before realising what he was doing. “He made my life—made both of our lives a living hell for the last five months. Why do I care that he died? I don’t want this to hurt!”

Rose wrapped her arms around his waist just as his suppressed emotions broke through his meagre control. “I hate him!” he raged as he wept into her shoulder. “I’ve never hated anyone as much as I hate him right now, but part of me still wishes he were back, because then I wouldn’t be the last one again.”

Her recoil was instinctive. She’d offered to bring the Master with them, but truthfully, she was glad he’d refused. He’d taunted her, belittled her, even beaten her, all to use her to get a reaction from the Doctor. She’d never trust him in a million years, so his death was honestly the best possible solution.

And the Doctor wished he were back?

The Doctor stiffened and pulled away from her. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I just…” He took a shuddering breath. “They’re all gone, Rose.”

Rose reached out and wiped his tears away before embracing him again. “I know. I know, my Doctor.”

She held onto him until his tears slowed, then she stepped back and looked up at him. “How long did you know him?”

The Doctor shrugged. “It’s hard to say.” He glanced at Rose. “You’ve figured out my age is more of a guess, haven’t you?”

Rose smirked. “I thought as much, yeah.”

“But…” The Doctor took her hand again and stared back into the flames. “I’d known him for nearly as far back as I can remember.” He sighed. “We were kids together, and best friends.”
Rose’s heart ached for him. She remembered how much it had hurt to leave her oldest friend behind in Pete’s World, and she had the advantage of knowing he was still alive and happy. Plus, as far as she knew, Mickey had never tried to take over the world—there was no guilt in missing him.

When the flames had engulfed the Master’s body, the Doctor turned silently and they started to leave. They’d only taken two steps away from the pyre when Rose stopped. The timelines were flowing around this moment so heavily they almost hummed. She remembered what the Doctor had said about key moments of her life resonating more because of her time as Bad Wolf, and she pulled her hand away from his and followed her instincts around to the other side of the pyre.

“What are you doing, Rose?”

“Doesn’t it seem odd to you, Doctor, that barely five minutes after you told him you knew better than to think he would ever purposely end his life, the Master did exactly that?”

“It was about finally beating me. He wanted to leave me alone,” the Doctor said, his earlier bitterness back.

Rose shook her head as she scanned the ground for… something. “Blowing up the rockets and making the Earth burn would have beaten you, too. He only chose to die when it was obvious he’d lost. It makes me wonder if he had a back-up plan in place.” She spotted something glinting on the ground and picked it up. “I wonder what this is.”

The Doctor came around to join her, and his eyes widened when he saw the ornate silver ring she held. “That’s a resurrection ring,” he said.

“Like in Harry Potter?”

“Sort of.” The Doctor took it and held it up to the firelight. “I thought those were only a myth. They should only be a myth.”

Rose looked at the circular Gallifreyan on the bezel of the ring. “And what does this definitely-not-a-myth do?”

“You leave an imprint on the ring of your identity, and it can be used to… well, not technically bring you back to life… more like create a clone of you, but one that shares all your memories and experiences.”

“It’s a horcrux,” Rose said flatly.

“Well… in a manner of speaking… yes.”

“So what do we do with it?” Rose looked up at the Doctor. “I don’t suppose you happen to have a basilisk fang lying about.”

He chuckled. “No, and that wouldn’t help in this case.” He tossed the ring up in the air and caught it, then looked at it critically. “We need to make sure this never gets into the wrong hands, and I think I know just what to do with it.”

“Throw it into the fires of Mount Doom?”

“Hitting all your favourite fantasy series, aren’t you?” The Doctor shot a sidelong glance at Rose. She hadn’t given him a real Rose Tyler smile since they’d been separated, and joking about Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings seemed like the perfect way to make her grin. But even now, she barely
smiled, and he had to swallow back the lump in his throat. *Be patient,* he reminded himself, before looking at the ring again. “But no, I was thinking something a little more simple—like tossing it out of the TARDIS doors.”

“Straight into a supernova?” Rose suggested. “I’m not leaving it on Earth, so if we’re throwing it out of the TARDIS, we’d better be in space.” She frowned. “I’m not throwing it into the Vortex either. There’s too much of a possibility of someone managing to find it.”

“In the Time Vortex, Rose?” He dropped the ring into his pocket and started for the TARDIS.

“Who knows what you could do with a Vortex manipulator, if you knew what you were doing?”

The Doctor had to admit she had a point, and the Master had already proven himself capable of doing things he didn’t even think was possible. “All right, fine. Once we’re done here, we’ll find a nice supernova and get rid of the Master’s horcrux.”

oOoOoOoOo

Working together, the Doctor and Rose kept the promise they’d made to Jack before leaving him to deal with UNIT and landed the TARDIS on the flight deck of the *Valiant* only an hour after they had left. Jack and the Jones family had all cleaned up while they were gone, though they were still wearing the uniforms they’d been given during their forced servitude.

Tish and Clive followed Jack willingly onto the ship, but Francine hung back. “Are you certain it’s safe, Martha?” she asked, clinging to her daughter’s hand.

Martha rubbed soothing circles over her back. “I promise, Mum.”

The Doctor stepped forward and held his hands out, palm up. “Francine, you have my word. I’ll get you home only hours after you left.”

Francine narrowed her eyes, but eventually nodded and stepped on board.

The landing in Francine’s back garden was one of his best ever—as on time, and not on top of any prized flower beds. Francine, Clive, and Tish all exited the TARDIS, but Martha stayed on board.

The Doctor raised his eyebrows. “I didn’t think you’d want to be away from your family.” He shoved his hands into his pockets; he didn’t want to tell Martha that she couldn’t travel with them any longer, but if she didn’t ask to be taken home, he would.

“Just for a bit,” she said, and the Doctor relaxed slightly. “Just long enough to drop Jack off.”

He nodded and moved to change the coordinates, only to realise Rose had already done it. “One step ahead of ya, Doctor,” she said, giving him a tongue-touched smile for the first time since the *Valiant.*

Heedless of their audience, the Doctor cupped her face between his hands and pressed a passionate kiss to her lips. Rose sighed and opened her mouth, and the Doctor adjusted the angle of the kiss with one hand while trailing the other down her back and pulling her close.

A whistle from Jack drew him back to reality, and he broke the kiss and pressed his forehead to hers. *As soon as we’re alone, Rose Tyler…*

She spun away from him and started the dematerialisation sequence. *I’ve got a few plans of my own, Doctor. It was a long year.*
“Mind if I interrupt your telepathic sweet nothings to talk to Rosie for a moment, Doc?”

The Doctor crossed his arms over his chest. “Jack…”

Jack winked at him, then swept Rose up in a hug. “I’m so glad you’re alive.”

His words were a whisper, but the Doctor’s superior hearing picked them up easily, and his hearts constricted at the emotion in Jack’s voice. He’d forgotten… well, not really considered that Jack and Martha hadn’t known until today that Rose was still alive.

The TARDIS landed with a light bump, and Jack stepped back from Rose and looked around the console room. “We can’t have landed,” he said.

“Oh, the TARDIS behaves much better for Rose,” Martha told him.

Rose leaned against the console. “She just likes a gentle touch,” she said. “So, on the other side of those doors: Cardiff.”

Outside, the call of seagulls and faint hint of salt in the air announced their proximity to the bay. They leaned against a railing and watched people walking across the Roald Dahl Plass with no idea they had nearly been enslaved by a madman.

“Time was,” Martha said, “every single one of these people knew your name. Now they’ve all forgotten you.”

“Good,” the Doctor said firmly. “The fewer people carrying memories of that year, the better.”

Jack ducked under the railing. “Back to work. If I remember right, I need to recall my team from the Himalayas.”

“You have Rose’s mobile?” the Doctor asked. Jack nodded. “Call if you need us then,” he told him.

It was an olive branch, an offer to make Jack a true part of their lives. Gratitude lit up Jack’s face. “Thank you, Doctor.”

The Doctor was reaching into his pocket for his sonic screwdriver, still intent on deactivating Jack’s Vortex manipulator, when Rose nudged him telepathically. He paused and looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

Take a look at him, she suggested. I know what you’re thinking, but I really think we can trust him with it.

Jack had asked before if he might leave him with a functioning Vortex manipulator, the Doctor remembered. He turned to look more closely at their friend and saw for the first time how well Jack wore responsibility. He wasn’t the con artist they’d met 150 years ago in Jack’s personal timeline, and hadn’t been for a long time.

He took Jack’s wrist and held it up. “If I let you keep this, do you promise to use it responsibly?” he asked, holding his friend’s gaze.

Jack’s eyes widened. “Yes, sir!”

The Doctor nodded. “I’m trusting you with it then, Jack. It might make it easier for you to watch out for the Earth and find us if you need us.” He raised an eyebrow. “Just remember, it’s not a pleasure device.” He looked up at Jack, smiling with wry amusement. “I know it’ll take you anywhere—
twice even, the second time to apologise—but that’s not what it’s for.”

“Doctor,” Rose admonished.

“What? It’s true.”

Jack laughed, then straightened up and saluted them all. “Sir. Ma’am.” They saluted back, and Jack started to walk away, but turned back around after only one step.

“So I keep wondering, what about ageing? Because I can’t die, but I keep getting older. The odd little grey hair, you know?” he said, pointing to his hair. He put his hands on his hips and frowned at them. “What happens if I live for a million years?”

The Doctor stared at him in bemusement, not quite sure where this came from. “I really don’t know.” He shook his head slightly.

Jack chuckled. “Okay, vanity. Sorry.” He waved a hand, dismissing the question. “Yeah, can’t help it. Used to be a poster boy when I was a kid living on the Boeshane Peninsula. Tiny little place. I was the first one ever to be signed up for the Time Agency,” he said, pointing a finger in emphasis. “They were so proud of me. The Face of Boe, they called me. Hmm. I’ll see you.”

Jack jogged across the Plass, completely unaware of the bombshell he’d just dropped on his three friends.

“No,” Rose breathed.

Martha was staring after Jack, her mouth agape. “It can’t be.”


They looked at each other and broke into gales of laughter. He’d once called Jack an impossible thing; here was all the proof he needed.

Rose had tears streaming down her face. “I guess it explains how he knew so much, you know.”

The Doctor looked at her, and she shrugged her shoulders. “Well, if everyone else forgot this year, then the Face of Boe had to either be someone who was there, or someone with access to the UNIT files.”

“And since UNIT files don’t survive into the year five billion…” The Doctor leaned back on his heels. “Jack Harkness is the Face of Boe.”

oOoOoOoOo

When they left Cardiff, Martha pointed to the corridor. “I’ll just…” she said, then left the console room.

The Doctor shot Rose a sideways glance. It was hard to believe she was actually here with him, but he knew if he let himself think about that too much, he’d either break down in tears, or snog her breathless. As appealing as the latter option was, Martha’s return would be… embarrassing.

Instead, they worked on getting the console cleaned up. Jack had undone the paradox machine, leaving the TARDIS functional again, but remnants of the pieces the Master had used to cannibalise her still dangled from the console and the ceiling.

Once they’d cleared away the debris, the Doctor reset the coordinates on the TARDIS so they could
take Martha back to her mum’s. “I figure she’ll want to be with her family, instead of in her own flat,” he told Rose when she glanced at what he’d done.

“Yeah, probably,” Rose said, just as Martha returned with a pack slung over her shoulder.

The Doctor flipped the lever, then faced Martha. “What will you do?” he asked.

Martha leaned against a strut. “I’ve got a few people I want to find, people I met during that year. And then… back to my studies, I suppose. I just… My family need me, Doctor. They saw half the planet slaughtered and they’re devastated.” She looked from him to Rose. “And you need time alone, to heal.”

The Doctor leaned on the console with his arms crossed over his chest. “Yeah, we do. Think we’ll try to stay out of trouble for a bit.”

To her credit, Martha didn’t laugh. Instead, she held up her phone. “I’ve got Rose’s number too, same as Jack. If I call you—when I call you—you’d better come running. Got it?”

The Doctor’s smile was small but genuine. “Got it,” he promised.

The TARDIS landed with a definite thud, and Martha glanced at the door before sliding her pack off her back. She slipped her phone into her pocket and walked over to Rose. “Rose…”

Rose jogged over to her and pulled her into a hug. “I’m gonna miss you, Martha,” she said, and the Doctor could hear tears in her voice. “I know you have to go, but I’m gonna miss you so much.”

Martha’s arms tightened around her for a moment, then she stepped back. “I’ll miss you too, Rose. I’m so glad…” She looked over Rose’s shoulder at the Doctor, and her voice trailed off.

Rose nodded. “Yeah. Me too.”

The Doctor shuddered; the constant reminders that Rose had been presumed dead for five months were doing nothing for his state of mind. He swallowed hard, then moved forward to give Martha a goodbye hug.

“Martha Jones,” he murmured as he squeezed her tight. Her eyes were bright when she looked up at him, and the Doctor smiled, trying to let her see how proud he was of her. “You saved the world.”

She nodded. “That’s right. I did. Because I’m just that good.” Martha broke the sombre attitude by pointing at the two of them. “I’ll see you later,” she promised, then stepped outside and closed the door behind her.

Rose felt a pang of sadness when Martha left the TARDIS—partly because she’d miss her, and partly because of what the other woman had gone through. Her time on board hadn’t been anything like what she’d imagined.

“Stop it,” the Doctor said softly. “If I’m not allowed to feel guilty for things that are beyond my control, then neither are you.”

Rose nodded. He was right—well of course he was, he was quoting her. A bubble of giddy happiness settled in her heart when the Doctor rolled his eyes at that thought.

She was home. Rose leaned against a strut and drank in the sight of him as he flew around the console, sending them into the Vortex. It was a sight she’d been afraid she would never see again, and the thought slipped out before she could stop it. I thought I’d lost you.
The Doctor ducked his chin and pressed his lips together, and when he looked up, she saw shadows in his eyes that hadn’t been there a year ago. The lingering grief she’d been trying to ignore sharpened, and Rose reached for him over the bond, wanting to comfort him.

The Doctor’s hand stilled on the controls, then he crossed the console room in three strides and fell into Rose’s open arms. *Don’t leave me again,* he pleaded as he buried his face in the crook of her neck.

Rose sank her fingers into his hair. *I won’t, Doctor. Not ever,* she swore as she held onto him, trying to calm his wild emotions.

His lips found her collarbone, and then moved up her neck, dropping gentle kisses on every inch of her skin. Rose tilted her head back and sighed his name, then tugged at the bond, hoping the Doctor would kiss her properly.

Finally, he brushed a soft kiss over her lips. Rose snagged his top lip between her teeth, nipping at it and letting him know without words that she was not in the mood for soft and gentle. She felt him waver, so she scraped her nails against his scalp at the same time as she caressed him telepathically.

The Doctor sucked in a breath through his nose, and Rose moaned loudly when his arousal flared across the bond. She’d forgotten how deliciously intimate that felt.

*So had I. Oh, I missed this.*

When he swiped his tongue across her lower lip, Rose hummed her pleasure and relief, and his tongue swept into her mouth.

Rose’s desire swirled around him, and the intoxicating pleasure of feeling exactly how much she wanted him pushed the Doctor’s restraint to the limits. She scraped her teeth over his bottom lip, and he knew she wanted him to let go. But he was afraid that if he got too carried away by his emotions, he’d overwhelm her. To go from feeling nothing to the torrent of love and desire and fear that threatened to break loose…

But when he flicked his tongue against the roof of Rose’s mouth, her little sigh into him chipped away at his good intentions. Hoping to regain his own control by pushing the barriers of her restraint, he slid his hands down her back and into the pockets of her jeans. *Have I ever told you how much I love these jeans?* he asked as he squeezed gently.

Her sharp intake of breath told him she still liked that just as much as she had a year ago. *Once or twice,* Rose said, and he nibbled at her lip to punish her cheek.

His smug grin disappeared when she carded her hands through his hair and gave it a firm tug. “Rose,” he groaned out loud, pulling her snugly against himself and rocking his hips against her.

“Doctor!” Rose wrapped a leg around his hip and arched into him.

*Yes, love?* He shuddered when she rubbed against him, and he dropped his lips to her collarbone to muffle the sounds he couldn’t hold back.

*Don’t stop,* she pleaded.

Hearing her beg for him broke the Doctor’s control, just like it always had. He spun her around and pressed her against the door, groaning when she arched against him. *I don’t have any plans to stop,* he promised as he yanked her shirt off and tossed it over his shoulder. *In fact, unless you object, I’m going to shag you right here against the door.*
He slid a leg between hers, and Rose used the door at her back to give herself leverage to grind against him. The pressure was so close to what he needed—what they both needed—and their moans echoed in the console room.

“Doctor, please!” Rose’s eyes were half-lidded and glazed with passion, and she had her lower lip caught between her teeth.

The Doctor shifted, and Rose’s eyelashes fluttered as her mouth dropped open in a silent gasp. “Please what, love?” he whispered in her ear before nipping at her earlobe.

She sighed, then pushed at his shoulders. When the Doctor could see her eyes again, the mischief there made his hearts race even faster.

“You promised me shagging against the door, but we’re still almost fully dressed,” she teased, a playful pout on her face. “Or are you all talk, no action, Doctor?”

The Doctor stepped back, but he forgot all about pretending to be offended by her challenge when Rose took advantage of the space to take her bra off and toss it out of the way. “Right,” he agreed, his fingers quickly undoing the buttons on his own shirt. Their clothes disappeared quickly after that, and the console room was filled with their groans of pleasure as they celebrated their reunion.

Later, when they’d collapsed onto the pile of clothes, Rose started to giggle. “What’s so funny?” the Doctor asked, tickling her ribs.

Rose squirmed under his teasing touch. “We can finally check console room sex off the list,” she told him.

The Doctor laughed, then grimaced as he shifted off their clothes, onto the grating. “Come on, let’s go to our room.” He stood and offered Rose a hand. “Otherwise, I’m going to wake up with some very interesting patterns imprinted on my backside.”

Chapter End Notes

If this feels like the reunion was too easy (I know some people were really expecting undoing the necklace to be complicated), the difficulties you're waiting for are emotional, and will crop up in the VOTD story.

And a second note. I almost forgot about the rather major change in this chapter, with Rose finding the Master's ring. Yes, this is the end of the Master for this series. No End of Time and no Missy.

The specials are getting a major rewrite. The tone simply doesn't fit where the Doctor and Rose are, at all. Waters of Mars will be replaced by the story of how they annoyed Elizabeth I, and End of Time will be replaced by a story where Ten is abducted, and Eight and Charley help Rose rescue him. To say I'm excited would be a huge understatement.
The Doctor in the TARDIS With Rose Tyler

Chapter Notes

ICYMI, I posted the first chapter of another short work in this series over the weekend. *Hope is Where Forever Begins* is a honeymoon story, and is technically an outtake from chapter 7

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Doctor’s hands clenched and unclenched as he paced the room. A moment ago, the exasperation Rose typically felt when dealing with the Master has morphed into fear, sending a wave of foreboding through the Doctor. After seven months, they’d gotten used to the Master’s antics. None of his normal tricks would scare Rose like this, which meant whatever was happening, it was new. He paced the length of his room, trying unsuccessfully to rein in his fear.

I love you.

The Doctor froze for a moment; he understood now what Rose had meant about those words being terrifying in a moment like this. His brain quickly concocted a dozen ways to find her and get her away from the Master, and just as quickly discarded every one. He was locked in a room without any means to get the door open. There was no way he could protect her.

Instead, he swallowed hard and managed to say the words back to her. If something were to happen…

I love you too, Rose, he told her as he resumed pacing the room.

He was mid-stride when he felt it—a pinprick at the base of his skull, followed by an excruciating tearing sensation. Even as he fell to his knees, clutching his head, concern for Rose far overshadowed his own pain.

Rose? What’s happening, love? What’s he done?

She didn’t respond.

It took him less than ten seconds to realise she couldn’t respond, that the pain he’d felt wasn’t her pain being transferred over the bond, but the sensation of the bond itself being severed.

Their unbreakable bond.

“No. NO no no!!”

The Doctor threw himself at the wall and beat on it with his fists. “Rose!” he screamed. She wasn’t gone. She couldn’t be gone. She’d promised him forever, not a paltry two years.

“Doctor. Doctor!” Rose pinned her flailing bond mate to the bed and encouraged him to wake up from the nightmare with a gentle telepathic touch.

A moment later, wild eyes looked up at her. Rose held her position, straddling his waist with her hands pressing his wrists to the bed. As gently as she could, she wrapped his mind in calm,
comforting thoughts, trying to soothe the terror the nightmare had triggered.

“Rose!” He tugged at his wrists and she let them go, sighing when he immediately wrapped his arms around her waist and drew her down to cuddle next to him.

She splayed a hand over his chest and could feel his hearts racing. “It was just a dream, Doctor,” she whispered as she drew patterns on his chest with her fingers.

“How just a dream,” he countered, his voice hoarse from shouting in his sleep. “Memories. I thought… He took a shuddering breath and rubbed his hand over his face. “I thought you were dead for three months, Rose.”

Rose swallowed. “I know. Oh Doctor, I wish I could have done something…” She bit her lip and closed her eyes against the tears welling up. She’d never forget the agony in his voice when he’d cried out for her that day. “I should have thought of some way to tell you long before Lucy brought it up.”

The Doctor ran his hand through her hair, and Rose could feel him slowly regaining a tenuous control over his emotions. “That was Lucy’s idea?”

Rose nodded. “Apparently your coldness scared her. The Master didn’t think it was any worse than your usual reaction to his games, but she knew there was something more, and she wanted to… well, she thought you’d be safer if you knew I was alive.”

His snort shifted her hair slightly. “Well, she wasn’t wrong,” he said bluntly. “I don’t know what I would have been like if I’d come onto the flight deck still thinking you were dead. I might have let Francine shoot him.”

Rose didn’t argue that he’d never do that, that he was better than that. He was, but she knew as well as he did that severing their bond had put them both on shaky mental ground. Would he have been able to live up to his better nature? She hoped so, but she just didn’t know.

“What about you?” he asked finally. “How did… did he…”

It took her a moment to parse through his question. “He didn’t hurt me,” she assured him. “In fact, once he’d had his fun teasing me about how it was my fault you were hurting, he left me alone.” She pulled away from the Doctor and sat up with her knees folded in front of herself and her arms wrapped around them. “After all, he couldn’t use me against you anymore, not without letting you know I was still alive.” She laughed bitterly. “I was just an accessory who’d lost my purpose.”

The Doctor sat beside her and took her hand. “You are so much more than an accessory, Rose,” he told her, his voice earnest. “You are… You’re my bond mate. We’re partners, remember? The Master might have been blinded to that by his frankly disturbing obsession with me, but we’re equals.”

The words broke open a wound Rose had refused to acknowledge before, and her eyes were hot with unshed tears. “Yeah, but it’s always gonna be like this, isn’t it?” she countered, unable to look at him. “People using me to get to you, because you’re the one that matters and I’m just…”

When she felt the Doctor’s self-loathing, she realised this probably wasn’t what he needed to hear. “Oh, love,” she whispered, bringing their joined hands to her lips and brushing a kiss over his knuckles. “None of it was your fault. Do you hear me? None of it.”

“But I took you to the Valiant. I led you right into his arms.”
Rose sighed and finally looked over at the Doctor. His jaw was tense, and she reached out and rubbed her thumb over the twitching muscle. “Doctor, you know as well as I do that the whole situation was a fixed point. From the moment the Master took the TARDIS, we were locked into following after him.”

“Not both of us,” he insisted stubbornly. “I could have found a way… Martha didn’t have to live at his mercy for a full year.”

Rose pursed her lips and shook her head. “Okay, first of all, I don’t think Martha would say her year was any better than ours. Walking the Earth, knowing that the people who were helping her might die because of it? Seeing Japan burn and knowing the friends she’d just left behind were dead? Being hunted by the Master’s UCF?”

Her voice had risen in volume and pitch with every word, and she took a few deep breaths to calm herself down. The more she thought about what the Master had done, the happier she was that he was dead.

“It was a horrible year for all of us, Doctor,” she said finally. “The only person who had a good time was the Master.”

The Doctor’s gaze shifted to somewhere just over her shoulder. His stubborn insistence that there was something he could have done to keep her safe during the last year rankled, but she gritted her teeth and tamped down on her annoyance. She could feel the raw edges where their bond was still healing, and she knew that was influencing him.

Doesn’t mean I’m gonna let him go back to thinking he knows what’s best for me, though.

Rose tapped him on the arm. “Hey. Look at me.” He did, reluctantly, and she held his gaze, wanting him to see how important this was to her.

“And if you remember, you tried to convince me to stay behind, or somewhere safe, while you confronted the Master on the Valiant a year ago. I refused.”

Anger glinted in the Doctor’s eyes, and she crossed her arms over her chest and stared him down. He refused to blink, and Rose took a deep breath to control the tirade she wanted to launch into. His trauma was talking now, and yelling at him wouldn’t help.

“I know you want me to be safe, Doctor. I want the same thing for you. It killed me to spend those five months not knowing what the Master might be doing to you, even though I knew he probably wasn’t hurting you physically since he had some sort of weird crush on you.”

The Doctor set his jaw. “You don’t think it hurt me physically to be without our bond? How can you say that? I know you had headaches, same as me.”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it,” Rose protested. “Of course I knew you were in pain. He made me watch your reaction when he activated the collar, remember?” Her voice broke, and she swiped at the tears running down her face. “I heard… I saw… God, Doctor, I had nightmares where I heard you crying for me.”

A heavy silence sat between them for a moment, then the Doctor took a breath and nodded. “You’re right, I’m sorry. I knew what you meant.”

Rose rested a hand on his knee. “Believe me, I know exactly how much this hurt both of us,” she assured him, then she redirected the conversation back to her point. “But I can tell that right now, you’re sitting there promising yourself that if we’re ever in the same situation again, you’ll send me
away, no matter what I say.”

A trickle of guilt passed over their bond, despite his best efforts to suppress it.

“Yeah. That’s not gonna happen, Doctor. You and me, together. Remember?”

“Except we weren’t together,” he burst out finally, his eyes wild and chest heaving. “You were
gone, and you’re never supposed to be gone, and I thought you were dead and that I’d never see you
again and how can you expect me to just stand aside and let it happen if we’re ever in a situation like
that again?”

“Because I’m not just some… some possession that you’re supposed to take care of!” Rose
exclaimed. She understood his fear, she really did, but after a year in the Master’s control, she wasn’t
willing to give up her autonomy—not even to make the Doctor feel better. “I’m a person in my own
right, and I deserve the respect of being allowed to decide for myself where I want to be.”

The Doctor telegraphed his fear so loudly that even a basic empath would have been able to pick it
up. Rose made an effort to gentle her voice, though her clipped sentences were uncompromising.
“Look, Doctor. I understand. I know you’re afraid. And I will always listen to your arguments when
we’re in dangerous situations. But you have to let me make the final call.” He was silent, and she
played her ace. “You promised.”

His whole body stiffened, and Rose wondered if it had been unfair of her to invoke their wedding
vows like that. But he had promised, and it was a promise she cherished because it was a marked
difference from the way he’d acted before they were a couple. She needed to know he would keep
that promise, even when it was most difficult.

“I… I know,” he said finally. “And you’re right. There really wasn’t a way to avoid both of us being
taken on the Valiant. It’s just… I spent a year thinking about all the things I could have done
differently, and then when you… when he put that collar on you and our bond was gone, I was
convinced that it was my fault, that my negligence had led to your death. So… it might take some
time to convince me otherwise.”

Rose felt her exhaustion creep back up on her, now that the confrontation was almost over. She
yawned and encouraged the Doctor to lie back down.

Once they were lying on their sides facing one another, she said, “Well, thankfully, time is something
we have plenty of. In fact, I seem to remember a promise of forever.”

The Doctor’s breath hitched, then a tear rolled down his face. Rose… oh, love. You are my forever,
always.

Rose felt the wound beneath those words and was surprised for a moment, until she remembered the
way the Master had smiled when he’d seen the inscription in her ring. That bastard, she thought,
angry all over again. She was viciously grateful that she’d found his ring and kept the wanker from
attaining immortality. He deserved to rot in whatever the Time Lord version of hell was.

The Doctor chuckled and pulled her into his arms. He does, and he will, he promised her.

It didn’t take them long to fall back to sleep. They’d already slept five hours before the Doctor’s
night terror had woken them up, but after the trauma of the last year, they were tired enough to sleep
another five, or more.

The Doctor was the first to wake up in the morning, and it took him a moment to orient himself. Bed
made of dark cherry wood, a soft mattress, and a plush duvet cover beneath his fingers, all
illuminated by pale pink light coming from the sunrise streaming in through the simulated window. He was in their bedroom on the TARDIS. And that meant… He turned slightly towards the weight on his shoulder and brushed his nose against Rose’s hair. They were home, in their own bed.

He rolled onto his side and draped an arm around Rose’s waist and scooted closer to her. When the Master had broken their bond, he’d honestly thought they’d lost this. His only hope had been the paradox, and even then, he hadn’t really believed that breaking the paradox would bring Rose back.

But he’d clung to the hope for three months, until Lucy had given him something better.

Rose sighed and blinked up at him, a sleepy smile on her face. “We made it home, just like you promised.”

The Doctor trailed his hand down her arm to lace her fingers through his. “I doubted, for a while,” he confessed.

Rose went still in his arms, and the Doctor bit the inside of his cheek. He wanted to beg her not to be upset with him for doubting, but guilt made his tongue stick to the roof of his mouth. He should have been stronger.

“Doctor, no.”

Rose’s quiet, firm voice pulled him out of his spiralling emotions. “I should have, though,” he insisted, his voice rough. “I told you to believe, and then…”

She rested her hand on his cheek. “Don’t,” she ordered. “How could you hope when you thought I was dead?”

He took a few breaths, then nodded.

“And besides,” Rose continued, “how could I be upset with you for doubting when I did, too?” She brought his hand to her mouth and pressed a kiss to it, and he felt a few tears land on his skin. “I missed you so much,” she whispered, her voice choked with tears she was holding back. “I would dream about you… dream that we’d gotten away, that everything was done and we were home. And then I’d wake up alone, just like I’d been when I fell asleep, and I just wanted…”

The Doctor closed his eyes, tears pricking under his eyelids. “I know, love. I know. I had the same dreams.” He pressed his forehead against Rose’s and matched his breathing to hers, until they’d both regained a tenuous hold on their emotions.

Rose cupped his face in her hands and brought his lips to hers for a deep, tender kiss. As her lips moved against his, the Doctor felt the top layer of their shared anguish ease, bringing some healing along with it.

She wrapped an arm around his shoulders and rolled onto her back, pulling him with her as she went. The Doctor sighed when he settled on top of her. He’d tried not to think about this aspect of their relationship during the year on the Valiant, doing his best to even suppress his memories of making love with Rose. No point longing for what he couldn’t have, after all.

So now, feeling her trail her fingers down his back, the physical sensations were nearly as overwhelming as they had been at the very beginning of their relationship, when everything was new. Yet it was familiar at the same time, and that seemingly impossible combination was intoxicating.

Passion built between them with soft touches and whispered words of love, their earlier frantic need
softened to tender lovemaking as they moved together slowly.

“Forever,” the Doctor vowed as he kissed her neck.

Rose moaned and dug her nails into his back. “Forever and never apart,” she swore.

While Rose took a shower after breakfast, the Doctor moved the TARDIS so they were parked with a supernova just outside the doors. He’d promised her they’d dispose of the Master’s ring, and honestly, after the year they’d just been through, he was just as anxious to make sure his old enemy couldn’t come back.

Once they were in orbit around the dying star, he pushed the doors open and leaned against the doorjamb. He stared out at the stars and watched time swirl and eddy around them. Galaxies born, planets dying, stars going supernova—it was all driven by Time, the force that held the universe together and let it fall apart. The Time War had damaged the Web of Time extensively, but frayed as it was, this much remained.

The Master’s paradox had left ripples in the timelines that would take months or even years to smooth out. The ripples threw his time senses off, but something tugged at him, something about this supernova.

Unable to stand not knowing, he pushed off from the door and walked back to the console. “Why did you pick this supernova, old girl?” he muttered as he checked the coordinates. His eyebrows went up when he made the connection, but Rose appeared before he could say anything to the TARDIS.

She took his hand. “Ready?”

The Doctor pointed to the open doors. “Mount Doom awaits,” he told her. Rose laughed, and a smile tugged at the Doctor’s lips as he followed her to the door.

He pulled the ring out of his pocket and handed it to her. “I think you should have the honour. You were the one who found it, after all.”

Rose hefted the silver ring in her hand, then pitched it out into the mass of gaseous clouds. “Good riddance to bad rubbish,” she muttered as they watched it spin through the vacuum of space.

The Doctor stared, transfixed, as several timelines suddenly disappeared. He could only see shadowy glimpses of them—of a mad Master turning everyone into his clone, of something coming back that should remain lost, of his own painful regeneration—but what he saw was enough to make him grateful that Rose had found the ring.

“Why don’t we sit down?” he suggested. Sitting with her in the doorway of their TARDIS with their feet dangling out into space reminded him of his proposal. Rose sighed happily when she caught that thought and rested her head on his shoulder.

“Do you know where we are?” the Doctor asked after a few minutes.

Rose lifted her head off his shoulder to frown at him. “No, should I?”

He nodded at the swirls of pink and blue dancing in front of them. “This is the same supernova we orbited when we called your mum.”
Rose looked at the gaseous cloud with new eyes. This supernova had helped her close two different chapters of her life now.

“We’ve come full circle,” she said.

“Yep.”

She sighed and scooted a little closer to the Doctor. “I wonder what Mum and Mickey are doing now. And if I have a little brother or sister.”

The sudden surge of anger from the Doctor surprised her, until he said, “You wouldn’t have to wonder what their lives were like if the Master hadn’t interfered. Canary Wharf wouldn’t have happened if he hadn’t encouraged Torchwood to play with the breach. Jackie would still be here.”

Rose took his hand and carefully loosened his fist, then laced her fingers through his. “Calm down,” she whispered.

He fought to control his rapid breathing. “How long is it going to be before I don’t see him everywhere?”

His plaintive voice broke Rose’s heart. “It’s gonna take time,” she told him. “For both of us. An’ like you said about grief, it’ll come and go.”

The Doctor wrapped his arm around her and carefully shifted so she was between his legs, then he hugged her close. “I just want it to be over.” He sighed and rested his chin on her shoulder, nuzzling into her neck. “No, better than that. I want to go back to the end of the universe and make it never happen—just take you and Jack and Martha and fly away, leaving him there to rot.”

Rose rubbed soothing circles over the back of his hand. “You know we can’t do that,” she told him. He huffed, and the air tickled her hair against the nape of her neck. “We can’t, Doctor. That would be a paradox too big for even the TARDIS to hold together.”

She thought for a moment, trying to remember something hopeful to distract him with. When she landed on the perfect memory, she twisted so she could look him in the eye, then shared it with him.

His brow furrowed, but when he placed the memory, his mouth gaped. “You see, Doctor?” In her mind’s eye, Rose ran her hand over their joined timeline. Through all the twists and turns, their lives remained linked. “No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t change this. You and me, sharing our forever.”

With her increased understanding of timelines, Rose could discern now what she hadn’t been able to see the last time they’d looked at their future together. What had seemed to be one timeline then she could now tell was actually two, entwined so tightly that where one went, the other was bound to follow. Even as possible variations of their future broke off from the central, most likely timeline, they followed those paths together.

“We’ve still got our future, Doctor.”

He smiled, then leaned down to kiss her. Rose poured her love into him as his lips moved against hers, trying to soften the knot of grief she could still feel in his mind. She felt the corners of his lips turn up, and he broke the kiss.

“That’s right, love. The Doctor in the TARDIS with Rose Tyler.”

She nodded. “Just as it should be.”
And all that's left is the epilogue! In light of that, here's a quick peek at the plans for this series.

The Most Wonderful Time of the Year: Voyage of the Damned story, starts posting on 11/29

Taking Time: The Doctor and Rose take a year off from dangerous adventures to recover from their trauma. ETA late January/early February

Forever and Never Apart: Series four rewrite, coming in April hopefully

Follow the series to get alerts about all updates
Epilogue: The Stars Are Going Out

Chapter Notes

Here we are, at the very end. I want to answer a few quick questions before getting to the epilogue.

1) Yes, I will be covering Time Crash. That's the first chapter of the Voyage of the Damned story, The Most Wonderful Time of the Year.

2) No, there will be no metacrisis in this story. I've taken away every ingredient necessary to create the metacrisis—there was no way I was going to make Rose choose between two versions of her husband, and leave one of them without his bond mate.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When the astronomers in Pete’s World first claimed the stars were going out, everyone laughed at them—everyone except for Torchwood. Director Pete Tyler had seen too many things to discount a theory just because it was out there. He brought in Dr. Malcolm Taylor, the lead scientist, and asked for more information.

When Dr. Taylor finished his rambling explanation, complete with slides that showed regions of space going dark, Pete thanked him and asked him to wait outside. Then he turned to his two deputies. “Well?”

“It explains what the Zinzi said three months ago,” Jake said, referring to the transdimensional species who’d claimed they were seeking refuge in this universe because of the darkness.

Mickey nodded. “The Zinzi and those other ones—the ones who wanted to turn the Earth into a water planet to replace the one they ran from.”

“The Saturnyne,” Pete supplied, tossing the case file onto his desk. He’d pulled them both out before the meeting with Dr. Taylor, guessing the scientist’s news might explain a few of those mysteries.

He leaned back in his chair and rubbed at his bald spot. “The question is, what are we going to do now?”

“We need the Doctor,” Mickey said bluntly. “Get Malcolm Taylor back in here, and ask him to take the old hoppers and build something similar that wouldn’t damage the universe as much.”

“Are you sure, Mickey?” Pete asked.

Mickey leaned forward and rested his elbows on the edge of Pete’s desk. “Look, Boss. We’ve seen it happening here in this universe, and we know it’s happening in at least one other. The stars are going out. That’s the fabric of reality, just falling apart. And if that’s happening, the Doctor is the only one who can help us.”

“But the Doctor said travel between universes is impossible.”

Mickey snorted. “Yeah, he said a lot of things like that. And yet, somehow, it never really stopped things from happening anyway.” He reclined back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest.
And I know he also said we endanger both universes when we cross over like that, but if reality is falling apart, it sorta seems to me that they’re both in danger already.”

Pete nodded; that had been his conclusion as well. “Jake?”

The blond man looked at his partner, then at his boss. “Mickey’s got a point, Pete,” he said. “It seems like things are falling apart anyway, whether we try to find the Doctor or not. And if he could possibly stop this all from happening, why not?”

Pete Tyler tapped his fingers on his desk, considering the possibilities. Despite Jake’s, “Why not?” he had plenty of reasons to be hesitant about approaching the Doctor. The problem was, they were all personal reasons.

The Doctor had certainly taken care of difficult situations both of the last times they’d met, but not without casualties either time. The first time, Pete had lost his wife. The second time, Jackie had lost her daughter. They had a son now. Could he risk Tony?

And speaking of Jackie, if she found out they were travelling across the Void to the universe that held her daughter, there would be hell to pay if he didn’t find a way to let her see Rose. He sighed when he remembered her tears after they’d said goodbye in Norway; she wouldn’t be satisfied with seeing Rose—she would want to move back to the other universe.

But being head of Torchwood occasionally meant risking his own family, and right now, he held the fate of the multiverse in his hands. “Fine,” he said after several long moments. “But for the moment, this stays between the three of us and Dr. Taylor.”

Mickey cracked a grin. “Don’t worry, Boss. I know better than to tell Jackie Tyler that I’m going to see Rose, and she’s not allowed to come.”

oOoOoOoOo

On the Crucible, Dalek Caan started laughing. It was all happening like he had foreseen when he had fallen through the time lock and all of time had been revealed to him. Soon, the Doctor and the Bad Wolf would destroy Davros’ new Dalek Empire.

That glimpse of absolute reality had opened his eye. He had finally understood the cruelty of the Dalek insistence on exterminating everything else, and he had decided it must end, once and for all. With Time his to control for that brief eternity, he had pulled timelines, arranging the necessary circumstances that would bring the Doctor and the Bad Wolf to them at the opportune moment.

They were not ready yet. They had been too damaged by the Master to dive into travels fraught with yet more danger. To encourage them to rest, Caan had arranged for a Christmas voyage that would show them just how much they were hurting.

And on that trip, they would meet a man whose granddaughter they’d already encountered once. The Doctor and the Bad Wolf would need a new friend, someone who could remind them why it was important to care, even as tragedies happened all around them. Donna Noble was the perfect choice.

When the stars went out and the man from another universe returned, they would be ready.

Chapter End Notes
Thank you to everyone who commented and added this story to your favourites/follows. I look forward to continuing the story in six weeks when The Most Wonderful Time of the Year begins. I'll also be finishing Hope is Where Forever Begins (the honeymoon story) next Tuesday, and hopefully sharing an outtake in November of them meeting the Doctor's old friends. Subscribe to the series to get notifications when those go up!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!