Clinging to the Broken Strands of Time

by Taisch

Summary

"Anti-time, as intractable and destructive a force to causality as antimatter is to space, something with no past, no present, no future; a perpetuity of meaningless chaos and now with no beginning or end." --- The Doctor (Neverland)

This isn't the first time the Doctor has unraveled the Web of Time for the sake of a companion's life. He should know better, but he can't help himself. His recklessness opens the door to the forgotten ghosts of the Time War.

Notes

Since I recently had the urge to write some Doctor Who things, I thought if I was going to write them, I might as well post them somewhere. So here goes...

Disclaimer: I do not own Doctor Who or Lost Girl
"Gallifrey. The long way around." --- Clara (Hell Bent)

*trill* *SCREECH*!

"Agh!" Clara snatched the sunglasses off her face and rubbed ruefully at her ears.

"Are you all right?" Ashildr --- no, she was calling herself "Me" now, Clara reminded herself --- glanced over from the other side of the console room, where she was poking at the insides of a half-dismantled food machine. A manual was propped open on the floor in front of her.

"I'm fine. But why would anyone build a sonic device to be worn right next to their ears!?!" Clara threw up her hands in exasperation.

Me rolled her eyes. "You know what he's like."

"Yeah. I guess deafness goes with the whole aging punk rocker aesthetic." Clara sighed. She lifted the sonic sunglasses warily and tried again. "Aha."


"Is it singing?" boggled Me.

"This seems to be the demo. I should be able to record..." Clara pointed the sunglasses at Me. A moment later, the image changed to match. Clara tapped the glasses again and the holographic image began to spin in place. The mouth formed words but no sound came out. "Et voila!"

Me watched curiously. "Clever trick."

"Yeah. The Doctor used it that time under the lake. Made us think he was dead, the bastard." The sunglasses beeped softly. The holographic version of Me froze in place, staring back at the real one.

"But you didn't believe it," said Me.

"No. Not him, never him. No matter what he says, he always, always..." Clara broke off. The holographic image flickered and vanished. "Never mind. How are you getting on with the food machine?"

Me shook her head. "According to the manual, you can configure it to create anything you want, but all I'm getting so far is this." She dangled a foil-wrapped bar between her fingers in disgust. "Maybe I'm reading it wrong and that's a feature that doesn't actually exist yet."

"I wouldn't be surprised. The cake is a lie."

"The what?" Me unwrapped the bar. "This is supposed to be roast beef." She nibbled at the corner, admitted grudgingly, "It does taste a little bit like meat if you let it sit on your tongue for awhile."

"Gallifreyans are a weird bunch," mused Clara. "The Doctor once said he had some cousins who subsisted on nothing but mushrooms and tafelshrews for over six hundred years."

"Really? Why?"

"Not sure, but they blamed him for it." Clara chuckled. "Beat him black and blue when they finally caught up with him. Typical."
"It's difficult to imagine the Doctor with a family," said Me.

"Dysfunctional as hell," said Clara. "No wonder he doesn't go to family reunions. Still, this last time, they were more supportive. Fed him a bowl of soup."

"I'm not getting any soup out of this thing," sighed Me. She slapped the front panels shut on the food machine. "Perhaps we should just go to a nice restaurant somewhere."

"Sounds good," agreed Clara, but she didn't need to eat, any more than she needed to breathe. She wasn't sure she could, with her biological processes timeloped between one heartbeat and the next. Better not to dwell on it. She moved to the navigation controls. "Hmm. What kind of food do you fancy?"

Me considered. Her eyes lost focus as she consulted the memory chip clipped behind her right ear. It wasn't complete, as she had explained to Clara, but it did contain a searchable index and a link to the digitized diary unit she kept in her pocket. The equivalent of a zillion encyclopedias, complete with compressed sensory uploads. "In the Earth year 3992, I visited the city Zoshintz on the planet Yangega. New Year's street festival. The chefs were competing with the street vendors to win the God of Cookery award. A vote was counted for each serving of food consumed. The festival lasted for two weeks. I always meant to go again sometime."

"Two weeks. We can hit two weeks. Aim early, just in case."

"I'll aim for 3999. Their year is seven Earth standard years long." Me consulted the TARDIS manual they kept by the console. With Clara's help, the two of them keyed in the settings.

"That should do it," said Clara, crossing her fingers behind her back.

Me flipped the switch. The TARDIS lurched. A light flashed red and something chirped. Not an alarming chirp, more of a smug chirp. No one was reassured. Me waved her hands about, searching fruitlessly for a button to push.

Clara grabbed hastily for the console as the TARDIS lurched again, in the opposite direction. She scanned the displays, hoping for some explanation. "Whoa... what was that?"

"I don't know. We set the coordinates correctly," said Me.

Clara continued her scan underneath the console. "Aha."

"Aha?"

Clara pointed to a small screen blinking its message, helpfully translated for their human eyes. "Anti-lock system active. Randomizer engaged."

"Ah," said Me. "I'll look it up."

But Clara could already guess what it meant.

Two hours later, Me confirmed her guess.

"The Doctor did say the Time Lords would be after us," said Clara. "So he set up something to keep them from following us. A highly annoying and inconvenient something, but I suppose he was in a hurry."

"But we flew the ship before without any problem," protested Me.
"He must have activated it remotely from his TARDIS once he got it back," surmised Clara. "That's what I would have done."

"Yes," said Me. "Well, let's see where we've landed."

"It's definitely not Zoshintz in 3999," said Me redundantly.

Clara and Me found themselves standing next to a dusty road in a desert of yellowish rocks and gray scrubby plants. Clara shaded her eyes against the glare and peered upwards. "I'd say we were in Nevada again, except everything's the wrong color, including the sun."

Me turned back to look at their TARDIS. "Maybe the chameleon circuit is confused. It can't change the outer shell, so the ship tries to land in a location where it will blend in anyway. Hence the road."

"I'm not sure how well an American-style diner will blend in on an alien planet," said Clara. "Road or no road."

A wheeled motor vehicle (Clara admitted to herself that it did resemble an ancient American convertible) whooshed by at that moment. The occupants, who looked more or less human, didn't give them or the diner a second glance.

Me smiled at Clara. "They didn't notice a thing. People are like that, even without the aid of a perception filter."

"Right. Well, I think I see buildings over that way. Shall we take a look while we're here?"

"Of course," said Me. She retrieved a water bottle from the ship, then set off together with Clara.

"The Grand Canyon of Kroseterre? Is Kroseterre the name of the planet? We really might as well be in America," grumbled Clara. She waved away a man thrusting a glossy brochure under her nose, advertising hipposaur tours up and down said canyon. This only made a space for the next tout to cram a poster in her face. As this one looked about twelve years old, Clara didn't have the heart to shove her aside.

"Lots of planets have big canyons," said Me philosophically. "The biggest one inevitably becomes a tourist attraction. Which means..." She looked at the girl with the poster. "Listen, we aren't interested in a tour. But maybe you can lead us to a cafe or restaurant?"

"Yes yes." The girl nodded, bouncing a few times up and down on the tips of her feet to demonstrate her tour guiding prowess. The poster vanished into her vest. "This way this way, please to follow me!" She skipped away, backwards, head swiveling between her route and her new clients to make sure they were following.

Clara and Me shrugged at each other, then started after the girl, who took them along what turned out to be the scenic route that hugged the rim of the canyon. She stopped at each designated viewpoint to rattle off historical and geological trivia about the canyon, the town, the flora and fauna, and quaint local customs.

"Thirty million years old? You don't say," said Clara when the girl finally paused for breath. Clara glanced sideways at Me. The immortal was older than the canyon. The canyon walls were solid rock, and Me was only flesh and blood, but she had been carved less deeply by the passage of time. Sobered by the thought, Clara turned back to the girl. "How old are you? Don't you have to go to school?"
"I'm twelve and a half," said the girl, sounding offended. "I'm not a baby."

"No, of course not," said Clara placatingly. She sounded just like one of Clara's students. A pang of regret shot through her: she would never see her students again. Not her students, not her friends and co-workers, not her family. To them she was already dead. She dared not make any contact with them, for fear of damaging the web of time. Dead woman walking...

Me glanced at her, perhaps guessing the direction of her thoughts, then back at their guide. "So what's your name? I'm called Me, and this is my friend Clara."

"'Me'? Funny name," declared the girl. "I'm Sefnai Kestrel the Fifth. Sef-sef for short."

"Nice to meet you, Sef-sef," said Clara, recovering her composure. "So how did you get to be a tour guide?"

"My family, you know, always money not enough. Couldn't afford to pay apprenticeship fees, so they send me to my aunt. She runs Kestrel Riverboat Tour Company." Sef-sef jerked her chin at the canyon. "Anyway, we take turns: sing on the boats, line up clients." She looked around, then leaned forward and whispered, "But I save-save money to pay my own apprenticeship fee..."

Clara couldn't help but smile. "Oh? Where do you want to be apprenticed?"

Sef-sef bounced again and pointed. "Up there, see? Where we go. Best restaurant in town. Freshest food, tastiest soup, most eye-dazzling view."

"Sounds delightful. Let's get there sometime today, eh?" said Me, nudging Clara to get moving again.

"Right, yes, let's go." Clara gestured at Sef-sef to lead on.

"Not exaggerating about the view," said Clara, peering up at the wood-and-glass building perched up on a tower of rock that leaned precariously over the canyon. A narrow stone bridge connected the tower to the canyon rim.

"But why are all those people running away from it?" asked Me.

"And screaming. Let's not forget the screaming," said Clara. "And what's that thing that just came out the door? Do you get many aliens here?"

"Oh no. Oh no no no," moaned Sef-sef, gnawing at her fingertips in a panic. She had screeched to a halt as soon as they had come in view of the restaurant and seen the patrons fleeing. "It's a gul-gul makaht. A gul-gul makaht in a death spiral. How it get out? How?"

Now the creature, something huge and reptilian, with at least six legs and four whiplike tentacles sprouting from its neck, was on the stone bridge, blocking it. Restaurant staff with blasters were shooting at it, with little effect. At least three people were already down, unconscious or dead.

Clara and Me instinctively moved towards the bridge for a closer look. Sef-sef jigged nervously behind them, begging them to turn back. "Too dangerous, don't go. Skin turn into poison rock: you touch, you die!"

"Poison rock? Why the hell do they have a poisonous monster in a restaurant?!" Clara knew that even some people on Earth ate things like scorpions and pufferfish, but this was taking it too far.
"It wasn't poison before the death spiral!" wailed Sef-sef. "I told you. Freshest food. Elite chef, knifemaster, butcher one for special banquet only."

"Riiight," said Clara. She winced as she saw the creature grab one of its attackers and throw it over the bridge.

"And you wanted to work there?" muttered Me, _sotto voce_.

"We have to help them," urged Clara. "If it crosses the bridge and gets into the town..."

"It'll go on a rampage." Me frowned. "The blasters don't seem to be doing much. I'm not sure I have anything better." Nevertheless, she drew her own weapon and started towards the restaurant.

Clara slipped the sonic sunglasses onto her face.

"What are you going to do with those?" asked Me.

As it turned out, Clara used the sunglasses to capture an image of the rampaging gul-gul makaht and project a holographic mirror image in front of it. Taking it for a rival, the creature tried to attack it. It was tricky, but Clara managed to lure the monster off the edge of the bridge, to hurtle to its death on the canyon floor over a mile below.

Later, Clara and Me watched in disbelief as the restaurant staff actually sent workers in protective gear down the canyon to retrieve the remains. To serve the promised gul-gul makaht to the diners, explained Sef-sef.

"Yes yes. Super delicious. Death-spiral makes inside meat have extra flavor," she insisted. Which didn't actually make the restaurant's grateful offer of free banquet tickets to Clara and Me any more appealing. I wonder if they eat road-kill, too, thought Clara, before squashing the thought as politically incorrect.

"It's very kind of you, but I'm not sure our dietary requirements are compatible," said Me. "Thank you."

The restaurant manager protested. Eternally grateful, debt as deep as the sea, etc. etc.

Clara finally put her out of her misery, "Well, there is one thing you could do to repay us."

"Yes yes?" The manager immediately brightened. "Anything! The honorable gentlebeings need only name it..."

Clara nodded towards Sef-sef. "Sef-sef here wants an apprenticeship with your restaurant..." She looked at the girl. "If you're still interested, that is."

Sef-sef practically exploded with eagerness. "Yes yes yes." She bowed to Clara, to Me, then to the restaurant manager. "I am good worker, hard worker, learn very fast."

"Well," said the manager, looking Sef-sef up and down. "You're from one of the tour company families, aren't you? It's irregular... but I suppose the kitchen does have a few new vacancies. Hmm. All right. We'll take you in on three months trial."

"Thank you thank you thank you!"

Clara and Me laughed.

"At least someone's happy. Um. Good luck with the job! Thanks for the tour, but I think we'll eat
somewhere else tonight," said Clara.

Me nodded. "I wish you good fortune, Sefnai Kestrel the Fifth. Farewell!"

The two turned around and headed back towards their TARDIS. It was going to be a long walk, but at least the sun was setting and the temperature would be more pleasant.

"So. Food machine, then?" said Clara as the diner finally came into view.

"Food machine," agreed Me.

A few hours later: Sef-sef's first task in the restaurant was to help clean the kitchen. The gul-gul makaht had wrecked everything in its path to freedom. Not yet trusted with anything delicate, Sef-sef had been set to hauling bags of debris to the giant bins in the trash depot sunk into the side of the canyon.

On her tenth trip, a shadow slid out from behind the bins and confronted her.

"Oh, hello!" said Sef-sef. "I thought you'd gone..."

And that was the last thing she ever said in her short life.
The Doctor stood alone in the ruins of Gallifrey.

No. Not alone.

Zagreus waits at the end of the world.

"No. Dreams, memories, illusions. Lies. There is no such person as Zagreus," said the Doctor.

His time is the end of time.

The Doctor started walking. At the end of time, there was only one direction to go. Back. Back down the timeline. Away. After awhile, it seemed to him that he was following someone. A person who kept ahead of him, a shadow always on the verge of vanishing into the distance.

Zagreus sups time at a drip.

He was no longer alone. The Doctor's steps took him through the streets of a vast city. It was night, the sky hidden by fog. Light shone in sporadic patches from streetlights, shopfronts, and vehicle beams. Pedestrians and loiterers surrounded him, filling the air with meaningless babble.

"Hello? Hello, where am I?" The Doctor put himself in the path of an old man walking a dog. The old man gawked, mouth forming sounds but no recognizable words. The face was wrong. It wasn't the face of an old man. It was... it was... the Doctor couldn't focus on it properly to say what was wrong with it. The Doctor slid aside.

"Never mind," he muttered, hearts unaccountably pounding in his chest. Time felt stretched thin. Fragile.

Because bit by bit it's leaking?

"No. It can't be." The Doctor scanned the horizon, saw the same elusive figure he had followed from the end of time. It stood still, waiting. The Doctor set off at a run. "Who are you?" He pushed through the crowd. Faces turned towards him. The same face on each person. The same face, the wrong face, the impossible face. A face drawn out of shadows. The Doctor didn't have time to examine them. Time. He was running out of time. His every increase in speed was matched by the figure ahead of him. The figure never turned; he could only ever see its back. But he had already seen enough. He knew that with every step it took, time became porous around it.

He heard the soft patter of shadows falling like rain. The same pattern repeated over and over. Soon it would become a flood. A name was on the tip of his tongue. A memory that slid away from his grasp.

He opened his eyes and remembered. "Clara!"

That was the name. The face that he couldn't see anymore.

The Doctor breathed deeply, forcing himself to see his surroundings clearly. He was in his bedroom in the TARDIS. He could feel his ship's reassuring presence all around him. A dream. It had only been a dream.

No. That was a lie. It wasn't a dream, or at least not his. Someone was meddling again. He had to
check the TARDIS telepathic circuits to be certain, but he guessed enough to be angry already.

"I knew it," he growled when the TARDIS logs confirmed his guess. "My first chance at a good night's sleep --- and no, being knocked unconscious by a neural block does not count --- in billions of years, and this is what I get?"

He stomped around the console, furiously slamming the view screens this way and that, not deigning to read their displays. "Visions. Prophecies. Nursery rhymes. Must you beam every paranoid fantasy from the Matrix into my head?"

But he could tell that the old girl was worried, even before the cloister bells began tolling. And the urgency he had felt in his dream returned. The Doctor ran his fingers through his hair and sighed. "All right. All right. I'll check. Happy?"

The TARDIS seemed to hum dolefully. But the damned bells stopped, at least.

"It could be a trap, you know." The Doctor almost hoped it was. That would be preferable to the other possibility. Which he didn't care to think about. He took the TARDIS back to the place where he had met her. The waitress who wasn't. Clara, whose name was attached to a hole in his memories.

The Doctor programmed in a small offset to land about half a mile away and half an hour later from where the diner had been, then walked the rest of the way. In case it was a trap.

The site was crawling with police. The Doctor peered past the flashing lights to see that an area had been cordoned off with police tape. He slid on his sonic sunglasses for a quick scan. He analysed the results, and his hopes for a simple trap died. Traces of anti-time contamination had been detected.

The Doctor drew himself straight and strode confidently into the mass of American law enforcement. He flashed the psychic paper at them. "I'm the Doctor. I'm with UNIT. If you have any problem with that, call..." he rattled off a number. "Now tell me what happened here."

"It's a run of the mill domestic violence case," said the officer in charge of the scene, who introduced himself as Corelli. "I see no need for any involvement by, what did you say, UNIT?"

"I know you don't see," snapped the Doctor. "That's why I'm here."

"UNIT?" Another police officer, this one young and depressingly enthusiastic, hurried over to them. "You're really from UNIT? Wow."

"What is UNIT again, exactly?" Corelli asked in an aside to the new arrival.

"Unified Intelligence Task Force," explained the young officer. "They defend the Earth from alien invaders and..."

"Aliens? Oh, those guys. The European spook hunters. Fine. Go see if his credentials check out. If they do, you can be our official liaison," said Corelli. "Now shoo, both of you. I have work to do."

The young officer stuck out a hand. "I'm Mike Esposito. You can call me Mike. Wow. Are we about to be invaded? Are there spaceships?"

The Doctor frowned dubiously at the proffered hand. Then shook it gingerly. "I hope not. And of course there are spaceships. If you mean, will you see one, I have no idea."

"Right, right." Mike made some phone calls. The Doctor watched over his shoulder. He was disturbed to see that he had accidentally landed a day later than he had meant to. But it shouldn't
matter too much, should it? He cut off that line of thought when Mike turned back to him. The boy gave him a thumbs up and a wide grin. "Ok, right, it's all cool. UNIT said they didn't send you, but to trust you, anyway, if we value our lives."

Mike followed the Doctor as the latter made his way slowly through the crime scene, explaining the situation as they walked. Something about a man shooting his wife. The man was in custody now, while the woman was at a local hospital. The Doctor barely listened. The faint buzz of anti-time seethed at the edge of hearing, making his teeth itch. It was flowing into his body, wearing away at his self-control. Why was it doing that? Was he an anti-time magnet now?

Then he realized. It was like water, always flowing downhill. The Doctor had once contained a vast quantity of anti-time. Even though he had later rid himself of all (almost all) of it, it was like emptying a lake: the depression still remained to be filled if a new source of water appeared. Actually, that was a good thing, thought the Doctor. It would make the clean-up easier. Now he just had to find the source of the leak. "This woman. The one who was shot. I need to see her. You have a car?"

Mike nodded.

"What are you waiting for, then?"

"It's her. It's here." The Doctor's face was grim. He straightened, slipping the sonic sunglasses back into his pocket. A wounded woman lay unconscious on the bed before him, attached to monitors and IV's, a mask and breathing tube covering half her face. She had perhaps a fifty-fifty chance of surviving her injuries, but her timeline was being eaten away, drained moment by moment as the shadow of anti-time expanded through her.

"What is?" Mike hovered behind the Doctor, fending off the nurse and the guard at the door of the room.

"The hole. The broken thread in the fabric of time."

"What?"

"I have to close it. I have to seal the break." The Doctor set his hands to the woman's skull, causing a squawk of protest from the nurse. "I think I can do this telepathically."

"What are you doing? Stop that!"

"Stay back, please," said Mike.

The Doctor ignored them all. He closed his eyes. Focused his thoughts. An entity of anti-time had forced its way into the mind and body of this woman. A Neverperson? He sensed the same flavor of anger, of resentment, but here it was dilute, lacking full sentience. The important thing was to remove it. And seal the hole, using whatever he could find. He seized the tattered ends of the woman's timeline and knotted them. A crude patch, but it was enough. Time would heal. As for the shadow infesting the woman...

Anti-time flooded into the Doctor. He jerked back with a gasp of pain. He heard movement around him, and flung up his hands in a gesture of warding. Without opening his eyes, he rasped, "Stay away! Don't touch me!"

"Ok, ok, I'm not touching you. All you all right?" Mike. That was Mike's voice. The young cop.
The Doctor forced himself to concentrate. Horrifying revelation crawled through his thoughts. Words flooded uncontrollably from his mouth. "I can see them. So many of them. Splinters of one person, stabbed through the fabric of time like a thousand needles. Using my timeline as the entrypoint! But I didn't die on Trenzalore as the Eleventh. There was no timeline for the Great Intelligence to hijack. No reason for Clara to..."

"Who's Clara?" asked Mike. "The victim's name is Yasmin Philips. You're not making any sense."

"It makes perfect sense!" retorted the Doctor, his eyes still tightly shut. To see anything would be too much. It was already too much. "So many lives that no longer ever existed. Ripped out from the fabric of time. Dispersed! But they're brief echoes, degraded from the original. That's why, that's why they're not as strong as the Neverpeople I met before. But still dangerous. Still deadly. And now her single thread of life stretches away from the moment of death, pulling other lives out of time with it. Snip! Snip! The threads break. And so the shades cluster about her like flies to a wound, consuming, obliterating, unraveling..."

"Dangerous?" Mike latched onto the one understandable bit in alarm. "Is she in danger? Are we?"

The Doctor clamped his lips together. He breathed carefully until his thoughts ceased swirling so chaotically. Anti-time possession. It always turned him into a ranting lunatic. But he was in control now. He could hang on to himself. Not forever, but long enough. He opened his eyes at last and looked at Mike, then at the patient in the hospital bed.

"If she lives, she'll lose about eight years. Won't remember anything. But otherwise she's safe." The Doctor was already striding out the door. "One more. The husband. I need to see him, too."

The Doctor watched the man, the man who had shot his wife, from across the table in the interview room at the police station. The Doctor only needed to see him, not speak to him. The man was tainted by anti-time, but his timeline was still intact, if frayed a bit at the edges. The Doctor held his gaze, letting the taint drip free of him and into the Doctor.

The man squirmed, unnerved by the Doctor's silence, and possibly feeling the stomach-twisting flow of anti-time leaking out of his body. He burst out at last, "It wasn't my fault! It wasn't her. My real wife is dead, killed by that thing. It was a demon, an abomination, one of them alien monsters pretending to be her."

The Doctor stared coldly at the man. He spoke for the first time since meeting him. "And shooting her was your first response to your suspicions?"

"I had to do it. You have to understand. Hey! Hey, where are you going?"

But the Doctor had already gone. Mike shrugged once at the prisoner before following the Doctor, saying to the officers at the station, "Ok, I think we're done here. Thanks."

Once in the car, Mike asked, "So what was that all about? Is the murderer an alien or something? He looked human to me."

"He is human."

"Then why did you...?" Mike continued asking in puzzlement in between the Doctor directing him back to the TARDIS.

"You want to see a space ship?" The Doctor asked as he climbed out of the police car.
"What? Yes, of course. Where?" Mike trailed after the Doctor.

The Doctor held up a forbidding palm. "Stay here. Watch carefully."

"Ok," said Mike, stopping obediently. "What's that blue box thing? Why does it say 'Police'?"

The Doctor unlocked the doors and stepped inside. He poked his head outside one last time. "Good bye, Mike." The doors clicked shut.

"Good bye...? What?" Mike watched in astonishment as the blue box made a loud wheezing, groaning noise, and vanished.

The Doctor sat on the floor of the Zero Room with his back propped against a wall. He stared blankly at the closed door, trying to recover his wits. He had barely managed to dematerialize the TARDIS into the vortex before the anti-time had stormed his mind again. He didn't listen to his own voice spewing threats and insults as he staggered down into the bowels of the TARDIS, seeking the one place that could grant him a modicum of peace.

The walls of the Zero Room were, naturally, layered with zero matter, the one substance in the material universe that could partially mute the effects of anti-time.

"Well, what do I do now?" the Doctor asked aloud. "I can't stay in this room forever. And that wasn't the only broken strand of time, was it? There could be hundreds more. Thousands."

Then there was the problem of what to do with the anti-time, assuming he was successful in patching the web of time and clearing up what was basically a reality-threatening toxic waste spill.

"I can't trust myself when it's affecting me. And I can't dump it in the TARDIS, either." The Doctor emptied his pockets, hoping for inspiration in the growing pile of knick-knacks, string, toys, and assorted junk in front of him. Then his eyes fixed on one item in particular. Inspiration struck.

"Of course," he murmured. "A self-contained universe, but one with no living creatures inside, no timelines to unravel. And I already have a telepathic link to it. All I need to do is fix a transduction barrier across the exit..."

He smiled and picked up the item: his confession dial.
"A living conduit to a dimension which should never have met ours." --- Romana (Neverland)

Chapter Summary

Just call her Clara "Typhoid Mary" Oswald...

"You can't go in there!"

"I can go anywhere I like," snapped the Doctor. A few makeshift wooden barriers weren't going to keep him out, not even when painted an alarming shade of orange and marked with DANGER! KEEP OUT! signs. He turned to look at the woman waving her hands ineffectually as if she wanted to forcibly haul the Doctor back, but didn't quite dare. "Who are you, and why can't I go in there?"

"It's haunted," said the woman. "And I'm Klarise Arrowood. I'm on the committee."

"What committee?"

"The restoration committee. We're taking turns watching over the place until the exorcist gets here," explained the woman.

"Exorcist!" scoffed the Doctor. "You don't need an exorcist, you need a Doctor. Isn't it lucky for you that I'm here?" He clambered easily over the barrier and started walking along the bridge towards the building perched on the tower of rock rising up from the Grand Canyon of Kroseterre. It seemed to be a restaurant of some kind. The doors were shut and the windows dark.

"Wait! You don't know the danger you're in." Klarise Arrowood scrambled after him, running to catch up. "You'll die!"

The Doctor stopped. He turned again to the woman. "Tell me about the danger. What happened here?"

"It began about a week ago," said Klarise. She explained that one of the food animals from the restaurant had escaped and gone on a rampage. It had killed half the kitchen staff and a handful of customers before it had been stopped. At first it seemed things would go back to normal, but the next day, the restaurant never opened for business, though the doors had been found to be unlocked. A trickle of customers had gone inside to investigate. They never came out again. The police were called. None of them returned, either, except for one rookie who had been stationed by the door. He had run back across the bridge, screaming about ghosts and shadows. "We think it's that chef, their Knife Master. He was a crazy son of a bitch in life; death won't have improved his disposition, nor diminished his hold over his kitchen crew. So the city organized a committee and we decided to hire a professional exorcist."

"How practical. I hope you checked his or her references," said the Doctor.

"What do you take us for?" replied Klarise Arrowood indignantly. "He came highly recommended. He's completed four challenging cases in the last five years."

The Doctor raised his eyebrows at that. "Challenging cases? Ghosts?"
"You must be an offworlder. No, we're not quaint superstitious bumpkins." Klarise Arrowood lowered her voice and confided, "It's usually alien tech gone awry, or bleeding-edge medical nanoware from the inner systems. Personally, I suspect a foreign tourist with a revivification virus gone wrong. But we all came out to Kroseterre to get away from that kind of filth, so we just say 'ghosts' and leave it at that."

"Hmm." The Doctor considered her words, then shook his head. "I think the current infestation may be beyond the scope of your usual 'exorcism'."

Klarise Arrowood regarded him suspiciously. "Why do you say that? Do you have anything to do with these ghosts?"

The Doctor touched the confession dial in his pocket. A faint buzz of anti-time tingled in his fingers through the telepathic link, but the bulk of it was still safely contained for the moment. He smiled tightly. "Let's say I think I can get rid of them for you."

"But we've already hired someone."

"My fee is lower. In fact, I won't charge you any money at all," said the Doctor. I'm losing my touch, he thought. Getting slow. He should have simply claimed to be the exorcist and saved himself an argument. But it just grated too much to associate himself with a term so loaded with religious superstition.

"You get what you pay for," said Klarise, her suspicion only deepening. "What's the catch?"

"Nothing. So let me in. You have nothing to lose except your 'ghosts'."

"How do I know you won't make things worse?"

"You have guns, don't you? Everyone has guns. If not you personally, then your police or your army. Stay on the other side of your barrier. Call the police. If things get worse, feel free to have me shot," said the Doctor.

"Shot!" But she agreed reluctantly. "Fine. It's your funeral." She climbed back over the wooden barrier, muttering, "Crazy old man."

The Doctor turned the lights on in the main dining room to reveal ninety percent empty tables. The patrons sitting at the other ten percent did not react to either his presence or the lights. Although they were frozen in place, their shadows danced independently of the bodies they were cast from. Their expressionless faces all bore an eerie similarity to each other, but closer inspection showed that to be a trick of the light. Or a trick of the shadows.

"That's the trouble with restaurants," said the Doctor. He scanned the room through his sonic sunglasses. The people were being eaten up from the inside by anti-time creatures. The shadows on their faces were being cast from within. The same face, over and over, just as in his dream. "You never know when you'll end up on the menu."

Each of them was becoming, or had already become, a rift in time, just like the woman in Nevada, except that their decay was even more advanced. The Doctor didn't know if he could save any of them. He would have to try.

One by one, methodically, he worked his way through the room, tying up the broken individual timelines as best he could, absorbing the anti-time into himself before it could escape into the wider universe. Out of some two dozen people, nine were still alive at the end of the process.
It was worse in the back halls, kitchen, and other staff areas. Anti-time slithered and hissed in obscene clumps that might once have been human. As more of it pooled in his bones, the Doctor didn't need his sonic sunglasses to follow the trail of unraveling time to its epicenter: a wailing maw of chaos eroding the wall of the canyon. The Doctor groped for the timelines of the victims, but the disruption had spread too far back. There was nothing of them left. Nothing he could use to patch the hole in time.

_You're too late, Doctor. They're all dead._

Dead or not, he still had to seal off the hole, or more and more anti-time would pour into this reality. First this town, then the continent, then the planet, then the solar system, and on and on without end.

_You have nothing._

I'll find something, he thought. Somewhere.

_Will you sacrifice those trembling survivors you left upstairs?_ 

I've done worse before, thought the Doctor. But no. Not this time. How many years had the anti-time devoured from its victims here? It couldn't be more than a few centuries, a millennium or two at most.

"And I have four and a half billion to spare," muttered the Doctor viciously. He had recently spent billions of years in a tortuous loop, trapped in his own confession dial. Here, now, in this corrupted maelstrom of non-time and anti-time, he could wrench his own timeline free with a thought. He cut off a length, then spliced it into the tattered strands of the local web of time.

The hole was mended.

The Doctor gathered up the contaminating anti-time. Normal time settled itself.

Without another word, the Doctor walked back to his TARDIS. No one saw him go, except for Klarise Arrowood, who was too shocked at his appearance to question him. When the exorcist arrived a few hours later, Klarise did not mention the Doctor's visit. The committee had paid for the exorcist, after all. Let him deal with the survivors and answer their questions.

Back in the Zero Room, the Doctor forced his accumulated anti-time into the confession dial. Afterwards, he collapsed onto the floor in exhaustion. Just a brief rest before he moved on to the next rift.

_With every stop, our power grows. Unless you cut off the source. But you're too weak to do that, aren't you, Doctor?_

The Doctor refused to answer.

After two stops at uninhabited worlds (one long-abandoned asteroid base, one lifeless planet), Clara and Me hit the free food jackpot. Me returned from chatting with one of the locals and reported on what she had learned.

"A planet-wide party? And this is the capital of the wealthiest nation. No wonder it's so over the top," enthused Clara. "What are they celebrating? (Try one of these mini-crepes. They look really good.)"

Me tried a mini-crepe. "You're right, it IS good."
Clara, who had found through experimentation with food bars that she no longer had a working digestive system, watched Me scarf down another mini-crepe, trying to find some vicarious enjoyment in it. Clara was surprised at how much she missed food and the social pleasures that went along with food. Constantly watching other people eat while abstaining made Clara feel like a vampire.

Me picked up a cup of some exotic fruit juice from a passing trolley and sipped at it. "They're celebrating ten years of peace." She gestured expansively. "Planet-wide, no, system-wide peace."

"That's an achievement," said Clara, impressed. "These people don't even have interstellar travel yet, as far as I can tell."

"It's unnatural," groused Me. "There must be an outside force acting on them..."

"Don't be such a cynic," said Clara. "Not every planet is as violent as Earth."

"The ones who survive to this level of technology generally are," said Me. "Or else there's an oppressive government that has the power to impose its peace on them."

They continued debating amiably while Me sampled the delicacies on offer. The debate ended with a practical argument on Me's side when they discovered that a terrorist group had sabotaged the party by planting explosives under the tables, having picked this particular gathering as the most heavily attended by the rich, the powerful, and the well-connected. Luckily, Clara was able to use the sonic sunglasses to find all the bombs in time and disarm them.

"Good thing they were only rigged with simple electronic timing devices," murmured Clara to Me. Clara thought she should be feeling shakier than this, as she usually did when the adrenaline rush wore off. But thinking back, she hadn't felt the usual adrenaline rush, either. Her thoughts were cut off when Me dragged her away back to their TARDIS for a discreet exit.

"Come on. We don't want to be stuck in an interrogation cell somewhere," said Me.

"Right, yeah, that would be bad," agreed Clara. She fell silent, leaving Me to take them into the Vortex.

Me gave her a questioning glance. "What's wrong?"

Clara shook her head. "Nothing."

The Doctor was grateful to find the next two anti-time spillages on uninhabited worlds. The anti-time creatures, finding no sentients' timelines to latch onto, had been unable to break through the fabric of time. A little bit of mop-up, and the Doctor was on his way again.

This time, he arrived six months late...

...and landed in catastrophe: an entire planet drowning in the shadow of anti-time. The readings displayed on the TARDIS view screens were unmistakable. Billions of people. Lost. Even plants and animals were contaminated. The Doctor's hearts clenched in dismay. It would take trillions of years to seal the breach. Not even he had that many years. He would have to find another way.

_I can seal as many breaches as you like. It's easy. For me._

Use anti-time to save the universe from anti-time? It would work, the Doctor knew. The web of time would shift, some connections replaced and rewritten, but the hole would be patched. There would
be no further damage. But that would mean letting Zagreus out of the box. The Doctor wrapped his fingers around the confession dial. With the telepathic link active, he needed only a thought to release the anti-time entity.

*The beast that you've been keeping.*

No. No, this was wrong. The Doctor dropped the dial again. And then another thought struck him, that Zagreus had been working towards this point all along. Horror filled him as he finally realized the truth: a day late, a week late, and now six months late. It was no accident. Zagreus had clouded his mind when he was setting the coordinates, all to manipulate the Doctor into a situation where he would voluntarily absorb the anti-time back into himself in order to wield it to undo a disaster too devastating to bear. Every time he actively used anti-time, it sank its claws deeper into his soul. Eventually there would be no distinction between the Doctor and Zagreus.

I refuse, thought the Doctor.

*You need my help.*

Your help? You don't exist. You're a psychic construct with pretensions to independence.

*You don't have what it takes to save this world.*

You think? The Doctor shook off his despair. In a burst of motion, he dashed around the console, setting the controls and making adjustments. If he didn't have what it took to save the world, he did know where to find something that could.

The Axis. The depository of defunct timelines and aborted experiments. Alternative universes, alternative histories. The Doctor had visited before, but never with such urgency. The world that had been eaten by anti-time still had surviving alternatives in the Axis. The Doctor found the least dangerous version and used the TARDIS to lasso it, dragging it back into normal reality.

Using the newly replaced timelines, the Doctor spliced the alternative world into the web of time. The breach was closed. The people would not be the same people, the history would be slightly different. Less peaceful, the Doctor realized with regret. Time would be distorted. But not too much. The survivors of the original timeline who had colonized the rest of the solar system would not remember that anything had changed. A few sensitives might sense the truth in dreams or nightmares, but time would eventually smooth over the scars.

As for the anti-time still covering the planet, the Doctor knew it was impossible for him to collect it all bit by bit before it corroded another hole in the fabric of time. Impossible for him, but not for the TARDIS. The Doctor hadn't been the only one once infected by anti-time. So had his ship.

"I'm sorry, old girl, but needs must." The Doctor linked himself into the telepathic controls. "Brace yourself. We'll do this together..."

And they did.

"We can't afford another slip," said the Doctor, glaring at the confession dial, now lying innocuously on the TARDIS console.

*Can you stop me? It might be years this time. Centuries.*

"No!" The Doctor concentrated. Now that he knew what Zagreus was up to, he could shield himself better, mentally. He checked the coordinates, checked them again and made absolutely certain before
he dared materialize the TARDIS again.

The ship landed with its usual thud. The Doctor let out the breath he had been holding, checked the readings. He grinned in triumph. "There. Perfect." Then his eyes flickered to the confession dial and his grin faded.

The lines inscribed on the dial, the patterns and swirling Gallifreyan writing, looked fainter than they should. The metal looked faded. Was that rust?

The Doctor bit off a low Gallifreyan curse. It couldn't be. He scanned the dial with his sonic sunglasses. It could. It was. The anti-time was degrading the integrity of the dial. Impossible. It was trapped inside.

No. Not all of it. The Doctor himself was contaminated. Even the tiniest residue meant that every time he touched the dial, its structure unraveled that much more. He heard mocking laughter through the telepathic link.

*The walls grow thin between this universe and yours. How much longer can you contain me?*

Long enough, thought the Doctor. He thumped the door control and headed outside. As long as I need to.
"Your death is an established historical event and cannot be altered." --- The General (Hell Bent)

Chapter Summary

Enough is enough.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

* Ping *

A blinking green light lit up on a board. The Time Lord soldier known as Gastron scanned the contents of the incoming message and reported, "They've approved the additional power expenditure, Reverend Mother."

"Good," said Ohila. She was the head of the ancient Sisterhood of Karn and not a Time Lord, but the General (now acting President of Gallifrey) had personally requested her help. "Finally. What's the use of a stealth mission if the whole universe collapses around us?"

Ohila, Gastron, and a trio of technicians had been sent from Gallifrey on a mission to retrieve the human known as Clara Oswald. They had tracked her to the very end of time (a nearly impossible task that had succeeded only by dint of inspired guessing by Ohila), then back to the far past. Their first few attempts had ended in failure, with their time capsule arriving after Clara had already left. Then they had tried closing in from the other direction by landing before she arrived. That, too, had failed. Clara's TARDIS had somehow sensed their presence and changed destinations.

"The universe won't collapse, Reverend Mother. The Doctor will make sure it doesn't," said Gastron loyally.

Ohila glared at him. "DAMN that mule-headed, reckless fool. I told him, we all told him, but would he listen? No. He was too fixated on his human friend. He risked everything for her sake."

Gastron opened his mouth, then closed it again, shaking his head.

"What? Don't give me that look, boy. You know it's true." Then Ohila's gaze softened. "Oh, I know he saved your people and your planet for you. But you should understand that the same qualities that make him so terrifyingly effective against the Daleks are also the things that endanger us all. It takes a fiasco like this to shake some sense into him. Of course, the lesson wears off eventually and around we go again."

Gastron nodded. Not meeting Ohila's eyes, he asked in a low voice, "Do you think he really is the Hybrid?"

"Your General thinks so. That's why she sent me." Ohila was legendary on Gallifrey for being the only person besides his mortal companions who was able to sway the Doctor even one step to the right or left. After all, she was the one who had persuaded him to engage fully in the Time War, rather than endlessly skirting the fringes. "In case the Doctor notices what we're doing and tries to stop us."
"But do you believe it, Reverend Mother?"

"Yes or no, what does it matter?" Ohila sighed. After a pause, she continued, "Done is done. I hope for all our sakes he is, or was. Because that means he fulfilled the prophecies as harmlessly as possible."

"What do you mean?"

"He conquered Gallifrey in a bloodless coup, then stood in its ruins by traveling to a time when it was ravaged by age. The billions of hearts he destroyed were all his own, when he burned himself over and over inside his confession dial." Ohila's expression turned grim. "But alas, there is no harmless way to unravel the web of time."

"He'll fix it again," said Gastron.

"What touching faith you have, child." Ohila shook her head. "Let's hope you're right. Meanwhile, it's our duty to do what he will not."

Gastron nodded.

They would find Clara Oswald and return her to the moment of her death.

"Watch out!" Clara rushed to push a small purple-furred child out of the way of a speeding hovercar. She was just checking that the child was all right when a second hovercar clipped Clara from behind, knocking her into the street. Me hauled a dazed-looking Clara into a doorway while the child was collected by its anxious guardians.

"What...oh...ow." Clara sat up, rubbing her elbows and brushing dirt off herself. "Are they ok? What's wrong with these drivers?"

"I don't know, but the second one was shooting at the first one. Neither was paying attention to where they were going," said Me.

"I hate reckless drivers," said Clara with surprising vehemence. "I really, really hate them."

Did the girl have a personal issue with them? wondered Me, but she didn't pursue the point. "Well, at least you seem all right." She inspected Clara carefully. "In fact, not a scrape nor a bruise. Odd."

"The time loop, remember?" Clara said. "I'm indestructible now."

"Maybe," said Me. "But let's avoid putting it to the test. If nothing else, I've learned that it can attract the wrong kind of attention."

"Speaking of which..." Clara nodded to indicate the crowd of purple-furred humanoids who had gathered around at a wary distance, all of them staring at the two humans. Clara tried a smile and a friendly wave.

"I hope that doesn't translate into anything insulting," murmured Me.

Clara shushed her. To the crowd, she said, "Hello, there."

Luckily, they turned out to be curious, not hostile. One or two of them were eager to chat. "You're the aliens, right? What are you doing here? I thought you only ever visited the capital."
"Our navigational system is a little idiosyncratic," said Clara. Another hovercar flew past, swerving around a corner and barely missing a vehicle coming the other way. Blasts of air horns assaulted their ears.

Me winced. "Never mind our navigation. Does everyone around here drive like this?"

One of the locals waved a hand dismissively. "Oh, they're all right. It's only when someone starts shooting that you have to worry. Sometimes they ram a building, or another car."

"Does that happen a lot?" asked Clara.

As it turned out, it did, far too often to be dismissed with a handwave. One question led to another, and Clara and Me soon found themselves embroiled in a full-blown investigation, along with a bevy of concerned citizens. Me found herself impatient with the tedious checking of records that went along with investigation, but Clara threw herself into it with a passion, and Me could only smile and humor her. Clara's enthusiasm was seductive, Me admitted to herself. And it got results.

"Rapid industrialization following first contact with a spacefaring civilization can be rough," said Me, once they had figured everything out. "Unexpected side effects do occur. Frequently. Sleep deprivation combined with disruption of their circadian rhythms, with symptoms triggered by motion sickness. Who knew that could be such a problem?"

"Well, at least this one can be sorted," Clara said. They and the group of concerned citizens had brought their evidence to the government agency responsible for overseeing transportation and commerce.

"The agency doesn't seem too corrupt," agreed Me. "With pressure from the citizens, the issue can be solved."

Finished with their presentation, Clara and Me left the agency headquarters. Right at the front door, one of the locals called Clara back. "Lady Clara! My apologies, but we need you to sign these papers." They waved a clipboard and a pen.

Clara sighed. "Ok, no problem." She looked at Me, who was already outside. "You go on, I'll meet you at that cafe on the corner. It's lunchtime, so..."

Me nodded, understanding. "I'll reserve a table." Immortal or not, they both hated waiting. At least this way, it would only be one of them who had to stand in the queue.

Me had only just made it across the street when a speeding hovercar (its driver unaware that his road rage problems were curable) crashed straight into the corner of the transportation agency headquarters. The vehicle burst into flames. The building collapsed. Not all of it, but the section of it that had its main supports knocked out by the impact. The section where Clara must have been standing...

Me hurried back, eyes searching the rubble, clouds of dust and smoke causing her to choke and cough. "Clara! Are you there? Clara!"

She heard screaming, but none of the voices sounded human. Me pushed forward into the ruins, frantically shifting bits aside, ignoring the others also searching around her. And then she saw it: a pale, unfurred arm sticking out of the rubble. Me began heaving bits of wood and concrete away, hoping...

...that she was right. Clara. There in the dust, blinking at Me through her dirt-smeared face. Dirt, but no blood. Me helped the girl to her feet. "Indestructible!" she said in relief. "You're not hurt?"
Clara shook her head slowly. She clung to Me for support.

Me rarely even touched anyone, much less hugged them, but she conceded that having a building fall on you was fairly traumatic, especially if this was the first time she had been caught in it rather than having a narrow escape. Me hugged Clara back, trying to sound reassuring. "You'll be fine. Let's get back to the TARDIS."

Clara whispered something. Her voice sounded strange, almost inaudible.

"Hmm?" asked Me.

Clara's grip tightened around Me. And then a shard of ice seemed to pierce Me from behind.

Me collapsed, legs numb. She knew she had been stabbed, having experienced it before, but there was something different. She couldn't think, couldn't react. All her reactions withered before they began. All the while, Clara (it couldn't be Clara) held her closer and closer, until Me lost focus on her face, couldn't even see her anymore.

Then Me could see nothing at all, anymore.

Her life, excised from time, ended.

The person who had looked like Clara melted into the form of Me, fitting perfectly inside her skin. The only difference was the dagger in her right hand: a dagger that could only be glimpsed through the moments of broken time that clung to it like drops of blood. She, the invader, the assassin, spoke once, her voice shimmering with anti-time, "Snicker-snack."

Then she laughed and vanished.

"No! Ashildr! Me!" Clara screamed uselessly at the viewscreen through which she had just witnessed her friend's death. She whirled to shout demands at her captors. "Put me back. You will put me back! Now."

"We can't do that." The calm, pitying voice belonged to Ohila.

They were inside the Gallifreyan time capsule, which hung in a moment of time outside the normal continuum. A method of concealment, Gastron had explained when Clara had arrived, teleported away a moment before the building collapsed. Now she was confined inside a transparent, cylindrical cell in the console room.

"There's nothing we, or you, can do for her," said Gastron. "I'm sorry, Miss Oswald, but your friend is dead."

"Enough," said Ohila. "We need to leave, now, before the Doctor gets here." She gestured at the white-clad technician piloting the craft. "Take us into the vortex and set course for Gallifrey."

The tech nodded and obeyed.

"The Doctor? He's coming here?" An arrow of hope shot through Clara. "Can he save Ashildr?"

"He's done enough damage saving you, girl," said Ohila. "Let's hope he has sense enough not to rip time asunder trying to save her as well."

"Damage? What damage?"
Ohila indicated the viewscreen. "Didn't you see what just happened? The fabric of time is weakened by your continued survival. Monsters break through the holes."

"My 'continued survival'?" Hope turned to ashes. Clara said, her voice flat, "Which I take it will not last much longer."

"No," said Ohila. "I'm sorry, but we can't afford any more delay."

Clara nodded. She shut her eyes, not wanting to see or talk to them any more. She swallowed a sob. She didn't cry. She had no tears, not for Me, and not for herself. That was another natural ability she had lost.

Gallifrey again.

The extraction chamber, white as death.

Trap street.

The raven that would kill her.

The Time Lords and the Sisters of Karn took Clara back to the destined moment. She glanced at their faces: they were all watching her, not trusting her not to run again. But where was there left to run? Clara found herself again, standing right there, an image frozen in time. She need only walk back. As simple as that.

No regrets, she told herself. None.

And Clara Oswald went back to face her raven.

The Doctor had watched Clara Oswald die on Trap street, seeing her last moments only from behind. The image had been burned into his mind until he could return to that moment a second time. There would be no third time. By his own hand, he had erased that image from his own memories.

Now he followed her trail to wipe the last corrupted after-images from reality.

The Doctor landed in the capital city of the planet less than an hour after Clara had been taken. He felt lighter once he was further away from his confession dial with its reservoir of anti-time. Physical proximity did matter: despite the theoretical omniscience of the Zagreus entity, seeing something was not the same as actually looking at it. Out of sight really was out of mind. Or close enough.

He was relieved to find that the place was still intact. He was not familiar with the local dominant race, but they seemed harmless enough, bar a bit of reckless driving (as he noted when a hovercar sped by within a few inches of him.) The Doctor slipped on his sonic shades and followed the traces of anti-time to their source.

A government building of some kind, thought the Doctor. He touched the exterior wall, frowning at the tingle of anti-time under his fingers. He drew out the taint and headed inside. More anti-time traces everywhere, centered on a single body lying on the floor. The Doctor tied off the break as he was accustomed to doing by now. The body disintegrated into a thin layer of dust, so little was left of its timeline.

The Doctor stood up. He said to the room at large, "A person just died here. Does no one give a damn?"
No response.

No one seemed to notice anything wrong.

No one gave him a glance, not even when he spun around and gesticulated like a madman.

No one entered or left. And there were too few people for a building of this size.

And those few were eerily quiet.

Each of them cast a shadow reeking of anti-time, shadows that did not match the positions of the light sources. He had the sense that time had been tampered with. But tampered with by whom?

The sense of wrongness crept over the Doctor. He knew he was being watched. He shouted at the air, "Where are you? Show yourself!"

No response. Not a single turned head.

The Doctor stripped away the anti-time, absorbing the taint as he had on all his previous stops. To his horror, each person freed of their parasitic shadow fell at once, broken, dead, or dying, their bodies crushed or burnt. But he couldn't afford to stop. It didn't matter why the anti-time had perversely restored them to life, whether it was Zagreus mocking his efforts, or whether it was some other random effect. He could not allow the contamination to remain in the world. He stripped it from the floors, the walls, the ceiling.

And that was when the building fell on him.

"It's a trap!" The Doctor cursed himself for taking so long to realize the obvious. He flung up his arms to shield his head. Even so, he was knocked to the ground and buried. A chunk of wall scraped across his face, slicing his skin open. A trap, but whose trap?

"Mine," hissed a voice next to his ear. It shivered with the unnatural resonances of anti-time. A hand grabbed his. "It would have been easier if you had died, but in the end, it doesn't matter. Everyone dies sometime. All I have to do is find that point, and then your life will be mine. So many years... I can taste it already."

The Doctor couldn't see. His eyes were glued shut with blood and grime. His eyelids had been cut by the falling bricks. He couldn't move; all his limbs were trapped under the chunks of rubble. But he didn't need to see to know that this was not one of the splinters, not an after-image. This was a full-blown Neverperson, meaning someone able to think and plan, someone who had set a trap for him.

I thought they all died when the time station exploded, thought the Doctor. Back in his eighth life, back when they had first tried to infiltrate time. Who was this one, and where did he come from? Had he been a Time Lord? Hadn't the use of dispersal as an execution method been banned?

I know who he is. Do you want me to tell you?

Shut up, thought the Doctor. I don't want anything from you.

He will destroy you.

We'll see about that, thought the Doctor. He pulled back at the hand that grasped his, trying to drain away the anti-time that gave his attacker his power. But he met with resistance.

"Empty vessel," hissed the Neverperson. "You have no strength to fight me. Whereas I can
do...this..." He twisted his fist around the Doctor's timeline. Potential deaths scattered around him. Radiation, falling, fire, poison, bullets, and more.

"Agh!" gasped the Doctor as each death threatened him in turn. Any of them could take him if he wasn't quick enough to dodge. When he had been a student at the academy, they had played a game of jumping timelines. It was forbidden, like anything remotely interesting, even though no one ever actually dared to change anything. It was a test of vision and temporal dexterity. The Neverperson's version was played for real, but the similarity was unmistakable. "So you've been a student at the Academy..."

"Guess all you like." The Neverperson tightened his grip, turning the Doctor's timeline into a vise. A death that could no longer be dodged fixed itself as the Doctor's fate. The Neverperson chuckled. "Death by microbotic scaphism. Gruesome. I like it."

The Doctor choked, writhing in a futile attempt to break free. He could feel the icy edge of anti-time slicing down his timeline from his future death. When it reached the present moment, he would die in truth. Cold terror seized his hearts.

*Release me, and I will annihilate this hollow ghost.*

Always with the annihilation, thought the Doctor. How dull. He found thinking anything at all increasingly difficult. Nowhere to run, nothing to say. That's that, then. The lamps of his mind were going out one by one...

At first he didn't even notice that the vise had loosened from his timeline. He became vaguely aware of a noise in the distance. Sounds like an energy weapon of some kind, he thought. Odd frequency it's using. Then he realized that he could no longer sense the presence of the Neverperson who had trapped him. The Doctor doubted he had been destroyed, but at least he was no longer in the vicinity.

Then he heard footsteps crunching over the remains of the building, approaching him. He heard the sound of rubble being cleared away, felt the weight shifting around him. And then he felt the flow of air over his skin. Was he free? He sensed someone close by. The Doctor shrank away hastily. "No! Don't touch me. Stay away... It's not safe. I have a sort of, er, toxic contamination."

There was a moment of silence, then a familiar voice said, "I'll be fine. I'm wearing gloves made out of zero-matter-infused zybanium weave. Now are you going to let me drag you out of there, or do you want to continue your illustrious career as a grumpy anti-time compost heap?"

The Doctor choked. Then, "...Missy!?"

**Chapter End Notes**

"I bring Sutekh's gift of death to all humanity." A.k.a. Shoot me before I ever try to write a "fix-it" again...

Mwah ha ha ha ha! Seriously, though, I thought Clara had the perfect exit with "Death in Heaven" and "Last Christmas." I was happy for her. She had a full life and got to see her old friend (with no more lies between them) for one last adventure before she basically died of old age. But no, she had to be brought back for another season, killed off, then re-animated as a sort of time-destroying (but only in theory! We didn't see any negative consequences on screen) zombie stuck with the cruel and morbid fate of being...
forced to consciously go back to her own death. Plus the Doctor was not allowed to
grieve naturally. First 4.5 billion years of torture with a fresh Clara ghost on perpetual
loop, then insanity, more deception, and a forced amnesia. Bah. I watch Doctor Who for
happy fun escapist stories, not horrifying depressing endings.

I killed off Me so that Clara could have a slightly amoral adventurer to keep her
company in the afterlife. (You just know Danny Pink would be useless in that regard.)
"Oh Missy, you're so fine." --- Missy

A brief telepathic contact confirmed Missy's identity, but gave away nothing else. She was always better at shielding herself than the Doctor was. She could (it was an old game between them) be standing right in front of him and remain unrecognized, usually while wearing some ridiculous disguise and/or accent. But this time she didn't bother. "Well, look at you, you're a right mess."

"A building fell on me. Someone should have a word with the architect." He felt an instinctive reluctance to move, anticipating pain. He stood up anyway, pulling himself upright with the support of a chunk of fallen wall. He assessed his injuries through gritted teeth, "I think the bones are shattered in my right arm. Four cracked ribs. Oh yes, and I think my foot is impaled on something..."

He groped blindly towards his foot with his left hand. It seemed to be a metal building strut.

"Here, honey, let me help you with that," said Missy. Her gloved hand brushed his.

The shock of contact, combined with the pain, caused the Doctor's mental defenses to waver. The anti-time he had swept up from this latest breach washed through his thoughts in a torrent of rage.

"I don't need your help." He shoved her away roughly.

"Doctor --- "

"I am NOT the Doctor!" he shouted, ripping the length of metal free and swinging it at the space where he judged Missy to be standing.

Only she wasn't.

The Doctor (not the Doctor) felt the shift of air, sensed movement around him, but he was blind and off balance. Something stung the side of his neck. Everything faded to black.

When the Doctor woke up again, the pain had subsided to a bearable ache, as had the anti-time sloshing around inside him. He blinked. His eyes functioned normally, he was glad to note. Then he detached himself from various pieces of equipment and sat up.

He was in a TARDIS medical bay, complete with all the advanced medical technology that was standard issue since the Time War. He found himself half-naked under a regulation-size sheet. Someone had cleaned him up and patched him up. Healing bandages were still wrapped around his arm, torso, and foot. His broken bones were mended sufficiently for him to move around freely.

Someone? It must have been Missy. The Doctor sighed. She only treated him with such gentleness when he was unconscious. Awake, the two of them never dared lower their guard around each other.

The Doctor found his clothes folded on a chair nearby. He grimaced at their tattered, dirty state, but put them on anyway. They were still better than wearing a sheet. The shoes felt uncomfortably tight, but he managed to walk with only a slight limp.

The Doctor boggled at Missy. It wasn't only a pair of gloves. Missy was outfitted in a full suit of zybanium/zero-matter weave, complete with helmet (she currently had the visor raised) and boots. The black surcoat made her look like some medieval knight. She wore a weapon harness over the surcoat, with two ultra-light energy rifles and an assortment of power packs and grenades slung from it. At the moment, she had the weapons pushed back out of the way while she worked at the console.
The Doctor glanced around, noting the roundels and white walls. "This is Clara and Ashildr's TARDIS."

Missy paused to look over at him. "You're welcome?" she suggested sarcastically.

"What are you doing in here?"

Missy twisted a dial on the console. "Fixing the dog's breakfast you made of the navigation system."

"Where's Clara?"

"The Time Lords took her back."

"Ah." The Doctor seemed to deflate. He sagged against the wall, then asked, "And Ashildr?"

"Eaten by a Neverperson," reported Missy. "There. That's done it." She flicked a switch. A light began blinking. Missy hit the door control. She gave the Doctor a look, then headed outside.

"Wait, that's the recall circuit..." The Doctor hastily moved to follow Missy outside. The TARDIS dematerialized behind him only a few seconds later. The Doctor blinked away the after-images of the flashing diner lights to find himself in the semi-darkness of local night. The sky was clear, with the light from two moons providing pale illumination.

Missy didn't look back. She took out her handheld device and consulted it, then started off down the street, forcing the Doctor to scramble after her. They seemed to be in the outskirts of the city. Thankfully traffic was sparse here and pedestrians non-existent at this time of night.

"Missy," said the Doctor once he had caught up. She paused in acknowledgement of his presence, but didn't say anything. The Doctor cleared his throat, then said, "You helped me."

"Well," said Missy. "I heard you exiled Rassilon. That's worth a chuckle or two."

"I was angry," began the Doctor. Then, "You heard? You've been back?" And then he berated himself for his stupidity. "Of course. You're working for the CIA."

"Made a deal with them, ages ago, or I'd still be languishing in a cell underneath the Citadel," said Missy.

The Doctor nodded. She had tried to kill Rassilon and probably cost him a regeneration. Rassilon, the sometime Lord President of Gallifrey and ancient founder of Time Lord society, wasn't the forgiving type, but he and the Celestial Intervention Agency had been at odds since the Time War, so naturally the CIA would release Missy just to irritate him. "So what is it? Were you sent to kill me? Or save me?"

"They left it up to my discretion."

The Doctor snorted. "They wanted to maintain plausible deniability."

"They're too scared to act directly," said Missy. "This Hybrid business has them cowering in their time-proof bunkers, hoping they can wait it out."

The Doctor groaned at the mention of the "Hybrid". "Oh, don't start with that nonsense. Why is it always me, anyway? You destroy a quarter of the known universe, and there's not a peep from the Matrix!"

Missy smirked. "Some of us had the sense to delete our biodata records." She moved around to poke
an armored finger at the Doctor's chest. "The problem with you is that you're basically a coward, and you take half-measures that leave you worse off than if you had left things alone in the first place."

"They would have had me dispersed if they'd known," snarled the Doctor (not the Doctor), catching Missy's hand in an iron grip. Then he blinked, releasing her and stepping back. "What? What are you talking about?"

"The first time you broke into the Cloisters and hacked the Matrix."

"I don't remember. I can't remember." The Doctor clutched his head. He couldn't focus. The anti-time was running rampant through his thoughts, gleeful with prophecies of destruction and chaos. "I need... I need to get back to my TARDIS."

Missy checked her device again. "I can't find any traces of the Neverpeople here. We can use your TARDIS to track them down," she decided, inviting herself along as the Doctor stumbled off, too dazed to object to anything.

The Doctor held his confession dial in his left hand. His right hand rested lightly on the TARDIS console. The doors clicked shut. Missy stood just inside, watching him, her expression unreadable behind the black-tinted visor of her helm. She had one of her energy rifles aimed straight at his chest. The Doctor stared at her. He couldn't remember who she was or what he was doing.

Had she just shot him? The faint echo of an energy discharge still rang in his ears.

Before she could shoot him again, the Doctor snatched the rifle from her hands. He couldn't remember moving, couldn't remember crossing the space between them, but now he was there, holding her at gunpoint.

"It's a modified staser," said Missy calmly, ignoring the muzzle pressed up under her chin. "It fires beams of chronon energy, modulated to interfere with anti-time particles. It won't do anything to me."

The Doctor grunted and stepped back, lowering the weapon. "Come on." His thoughts were still confused, but he knew that he couldn't leave her alone with the TARDIS controls. He set off down an interior corridor. Missy followed him without argument, to his relief, though he couldn't remember why he should feel relieved. He kept a tight rein on his thoughts until they reached the Zero Room. Once the anti-time was drained into the confession dial, the Doctor recovered something approaching a clear mind again.

"So that's where you've been hoarding the anti-time," said Missy. She sat down in front of him, looking down at the confession dial without touching it.

"I'm not hoarding it," grumbled the Doctor. "Just storing it until I find somewhere better."

"Divergent universe?" suggested Missy. At the Doctor's inquiring frown, she said, "I did read the files."

"Huh. Files. Reports. I had to do one on you once. So I know what a pack of lies they are," said the Doctor. He leaned back against the wall with his legs stretched out, closing his eyes tiredly.

"I've seen the prophecy, too. The real one, not your hackwork."

The Doctor's eyes snapped open again. "What? What "real one"? How would you have seen it?"
Missy flipped up her visor to stare at him intently. "You showed it to me. A long, long time ago."

"I... I what? Why would I...?"

"Because you didn't want to know. You made yourself forget. But you gave me the memories first." Missy's voice softened. "That was when you still trusted me."

The Doctor stared. Was she lying? She lied, all the time, out of cruelty, out of kindness, on a whim, constantly.

"I can show you, if you like," offered Missy. She seemed sincere. But the Doctor knew he could seem just as sincere when he was deceiving someone.

"No. No. It doesn't matter. I don't care anymore." He had been frightened by it once, that was true, but that was lifetimes ago. He refused to let any prophecies rule him now.

"You should have erased it completely. As it is, the vagueness only made the Time Lords more paranoid. Everyone filled in the details with their own fevered imaginings." Missy laughed. "During the Time War, Hybrid-mania got so out of hand that everyone was trying to create their own version, thinking it would be the ultimate weapon. Even I got caught up it."

"Weapons," scoffed the Doctor. He examined the rifle he had taken from Missy, then pushed it across the floor towards her. "A pretty toy, but it won't stop a Neverperson for more than a few moments."

"Keep it. You might need those few moments," said Missy. She pushed the rifle back with her foot. "So why not the Divergent universe?"

"I can't risk it. I barely got out ahead of them, last time."

"Them'?"

"That unholy couple: Keep and Perfection." The Doctor shook his head. "Never mind. It doesn't matter who they are, just that we can't allow them into this universe. It was enough of a risk when they fished Rassilon out, and that didn't involve going into the Divergent universe, as I would have to in order to dump the anti-time there. Besides, the Divergents have already suffered enough from our meddling."

"Guilt is a waste of energy," said Missy. "But granting the dangers of the Divergent universe, what alternative do you have?"

"Nothing, yet," admitted the Doctor. "But that isn't the main problem. The main problem is the Neverpeople who have slipped into our universe. I have no way of catching or holding them, and even if I did, the confession dial won't be able to contain them. They are active anti-time agents, meaning they are antithetical to everything and anything in this reality."

"Hmmmm. Anything in this reality," mused Missy. "That reminds me of something. What was it? Oh yes, 'two birds, one stone.' There's your solution."

"What? What solution?" demanded the Doctor.

Missy explained.

"Ah." The Doctor nodded. He clambered stiffly to his feet, slipping the confession dial into his pocket. "All right. It's a good idea. But I'll go alone. Timelines."
"I know," said Missy.

He dropped her off on a peaceful, uninhabited planet. "I don't care if it's boring. I'll be right back!"

"You'd better be," replied Missy.

The Doctor didn't wait to hear whatever else she might say. He shut the doors and went to set the coordinates Missy had suggested. This would be tricky, but he was sure the TARDIS could manage it. Almost sure. Probably.

Stop dithering, he told himself. He hit the lever and dematerialized the TARDIS. The ship protested with a shriek and a shower of sparks, lurching violently back and forth. The Doctor held on to the console, muttering in encouragement, "Come on, come on, you can do this. Just along the edge, not straight in. Easy now...sideways in time..."

For a moment they were drowning in flashes of horror and devastation, a confusion of images and brittle moments...

...and then they were through. Past the time lock.
Darkness. The scanners showed only darkness and more darkness. The TARDIS drifted in an empty sky over a world of eternal night. The Doctor knew from the TARDIS sensors that they fell in orbit around a planet with a size and density similar to Earth. No sun, no moon, no other planets, no stars in detection range. The temporal readings came up indeterminate.

"Only to be expected," the Doctor said aloud. He adjusted the settings on the array of chronometric instruments on the console and checked the results. "Now this is odd. Reality seems to be smeared across a wider spectrum than usual. This seems to be the 'outer edge'. Navigation will be different. How different, I'm not sure yet." He turned a knob. "But that's not the question. The question is, will the anti-time be nullified in this reality?"

The Doctor consulted a screen. "And that would be a 'yes'.'

He hooked up his confession dial to the console, along with a teleportation unit he had scavenged from one of the hundreds of junk closets in the TARDIS. The unit hadn't been used for centuries, by the thickness of dust smothering it, but the Doctor wiped it off and cleared the vents. A new power cell, a few calibrating test-ports, and it was good to go.

The Doctor set up the program, then monitored its progress on the TARDIS scanners. Anti-time lit the darkness in scattered bursts of multi-colored light as it was beamed out on random trajectories meant to minimize the danger of the individual particles coalescing to form a coherent consciousness. The teleportation unit, boosted by the TARDIS, was easily powerful enough to have a range of nearly a light year in every direction. The traces visible on the scanner were only a miniscule fraction of the whole.

"Good-bye, Zagreus!" The Doctor wiped his face with his hands, metaphorically if not literally washing himself clean of the "infection."

Zagreus sits inside your head...

"Nope. Not listening," declared the Doctor. "Going... going... gone!" No more voices hissing destruction or chaos inside his mind.

Cheered by the thought, the Doctor went to the TARDIS wardrobe to finally get a change of clean clothes. He would need them for the next stage of his plan. The more dangerous and uncertain stage, which involved some minor bending of the Laws of Time. All right, maybe the clean clothes weren't strictly necessary, but they were good for his morale.

The TARDIS had detected only a single locus of higher technology on the planet below, and the Doctor now landed his ship nearby.

He stepped out to find a dim and dismal maze of ceiling-less walls. A diffuse light emanated from the air itself, shadowing more than it illuminated. The passage in front of him opened out into a courtyard with a dry crumbling fountain in its center. The air smelled of rust and old blood. Time itself felt thicker than he was used to. As if he could access a slew of different timelines simply by
shifting his point of view. Something to explore later, perhaps. But for now...

The Doctor tapped his sonic sunglasses and scanned the area. He found psychic repellants embedded in the walls. He tightened his mental shields and muttered, "Cheap tricks. Someone doesn't like getting visitors."

He forged ahead, ignoring the feelings of doubt and fear pounding against his thoughts. The center of higher technology lay this way...

...inside a grand hotel. The Doctor went through a nondescript door and found himself inside a vast, luxurious lobby. A vast lobby with no staff or visitors and all its lights turned off. The Doctor wiped a finger on the railing of the central spiral staircase. No staff, but no dust, either.

"All right, that's strange," the Doctor said. His voice sank into the shadows without an echo. He made his way to the elevator bay. The call buttons lit up when he tried pressing them. A moment later, one of the elevators arrived. The doors slid open. The Doctor peered inside without going in. An improbably huge array of buttons filled the interior walls. One in particular, labeled "PH" was lit up in green, practically inviting him to press it.

"No, thank you," said the Doctor, deciding that the lift was too obvious a trap. He moved away as the doors slid closed again. Aided by his sonic sunglasses, he soon found and broke into the security office. "Aha."

Like every other room he had seen so far, the office was empty of people. Unlike the other rooms, the power was fully operational here. Computers idled on the desks, along with other, more alien equipment which the Doctor found disturbingly familiar. An array of screens filled one wall, paging through different views of the maze, the hotel lobby, the hotel corridors, guest rooms (all empty), and other locations. The only sign of life he saw was a flicker of movement in one of the corridors. A bird? It was gone before the Doctor could see it clearly.

The Doctor took a step forward, wondering.

A hand reached around him, snagging the Doctor's sunglasses in a swift, unerring motion. "Stealing my fashion choices, now? What would Freud have to say about that?"

"Freud would have a field day," replied the Doctor, remembering their conversation from a long-ago encounter in an ambulance. He turned to face the thief: a respectable-looking man of about the same apparent age, height, skin color, and graying hair as the Doctor himself. His voice and manner, however, were much more relaxed and cordial.

"You've made them sonic. Do I detect a hint of overcompensation there?" The thief slid the sunglasses off his face and handed them back to the Doctor. "Doctor."

The Doctor folded the glasses and replaced them in his pocket. "Master. So this is where you've been lurking, eh?"

"I've grown to appreciate it over the years."

Centuries, guessed the Doctor, judging by the apparent aging of the Master's physical form since they had met in San Francisco. Assuming this body aged the same way a Gallifreyan body would. Not a safe assumption. But it didn't matter, now. "I can't say I care for the decor. What's wrong with a bit of color?"

"This is Tartarus. I do have an image to maintain," said the Master.
"Speaking of which, you're looking remarkably healthy for someone living in a stolen corpse. You won't be after my body this time, I trust."

"Why? Are you offering?" The Master smirked at the Doctor's scowl.

"Shut up." The Doctor turned to examine the computers, tapping the controls to send a cascade of images flickering across one of the monitors. He frowned, recognizing Gallifreyan text. "Keeping up with your correspondence? This is from the High Council!"

"Formal requests from the High Council." The Master reached around the Doctor to click another command. The image changed. "Urgent demands from the CIA, (click) passive-aggressive war reports from the military, (click) and groveling unofficial pleas from my so-called supporters back on Gallifrey."

The Doctor moved himself away. "How nice to be wanted."

The Master smiled in amusement. He sat down on one of the (black!) office chairs and spun himself around idly. "They must be getting really desperate, if they're sending you now."

"They didn't send me." The Doctor, watching him, saw a spark of something --- hope? welcome? --- behind the mask of scorn. Whatever it was, it was quickly suppressed.

"No? But I hear you're a good little soldier boy these days. A proper Time Lord warrior."

The Doctor's scowl deepened. "While you do what? Hide from the war in your pocket universe while everything outside goes to hell? And you always call me a coward."

"I am a god," said the Master. "Here, in this universe, we can bend reality to our wishes. I'm sure even you can muster up the willpower to ---"

"No thanks," interrupted the Doctor. "Been there, done that, burned the souvenir T-shirt." But the memories never faded away completely. At least in this universe, the residue of anti-time infecting him was quiescent. He began pacing up and down the room, trying to shake off his unease.

"You're no fun, you know that?" The Master leaned back in his chair and gazed at the Doctor in mock disappointment.

"How much fun do you think there will be in a universe dominated by the Daleks?" The Doctor continued his restless circuit inside the confines of the security office.

"If you're so all-powerful, why don't you change that, instead of pestering me?" said the Master.

"I tried. A long time ago. There was another Time War. Not with the Daleks. It was even worse. I could only save the Matrix. A handful of lives, out of billions."

"So you're saying this is an improvement?" The Master chuckled. "So much for omnipotence."

"Shut up. No one's omnipotent." He stopped pacing long enough to peer out the open doorway. "So where is everyone? This place seems deserted."

"Unlike you, I prefer not to constantly be surrounded by babbling apes. But there is a whole world out there." The Master flicked a switch, and one of the screens shifted to a view of a city street.

"That looks like... Earth. Early twenty-first century? I don't recognize the city. Did you make it yourself?" asked the Doctor, remembering Castrovalva. But this looked to be constructed on a far
"Toronto. Or at least one version of it." He went on to explain how he had recreated Earth from a
timeline in which it had been swallowed up in the Eye of Harmony. "And to spice things up, I added
in a mix of creatures from human folklore and mythology. They call themselves 'fae'. It was easy
equal to insinuate myself into their history. I went back and..."

The Doctor's attention drifted as the Master rambled on at length about some overcomplicated
scheme that involved fae politics, breeding projects, cults, underworlds, armies of the dead, magic
dancing shoes, and atrocities that would fill the Doctor with rage if he listened properly. But because
he hoped that the Master would drop a hint about the object the Doctor needed, he kept himself calm,
nodding and making encouraging noises at appropriate intervals.

"Zombies didn't work out? I'm not surprised. Maybe you can upgrade the bodies next time," the
Doctor suggested absently, thinking of Missy's Cybermen. And then, "Fire-breathing horse? Why a
fire-breathing horse? And what did it have to do with this 'Wanderer' person?"

The Master was happy to explain. Unfortunately, the explanation left the Doctor little the wiser. If it
was all lies, the Doctor felt he could have put more effort into it. If it was true, it sounded even less
convincing.

"It was all metaphorical, but there was still an actual fire-breathing horse? Did it fly?" The Doctor
asked at random. Then he pulled his thoughts back together. "So, are you planning to stay holed up
forever? Things seem a little...limited here." He didn't say, It's making you insane. More insane.

"Why, do you miss me, Doctor? I'm touched." The Master laughed as the Doctor made a sour face.
"Oh, I'll be back. But on my own terms, not theirs."

The Doctor stared hard at the Master. "You can't leave on your own, can you? You don't have a
TARDIS here. And you can't build one from this side." The Master was trapped here, unless he
received help from outside. That basic truth lay behind the desperation that the Doctor sensed under
all the Master's boasts and threats.

The Master's smile turned stiff. "It's none of your concern, Doctor. Unless you came here to gloat?"

"Isn't that more your thing?" retorted the Doctor, a little unfairly. He waved a hand in pacification as
the Master started to look angry. "Sorry." He changed the subject. "So, what about this magic music
box thing? I'd love to have a look at that. Where is it now?"

"I gave it to my daughter for her birthday," said the Master.

"Which daughter?" The Doctor searched his memories and came up with a hazy recollection that
yes, the Master had mentioned a hybrid daughter or three. "Is she here? I'm curious to meet her."

"Bo Dennis," clarified the Master. "She's living in Toronto with that doctor girlfriend of hers."

"A doctor? She has good taste," said the Doctor. He deflected the Master's foul look with an
innocent smile.

"And they say I'm egotistical." The Master clicked something on his computer. A moment later, the
image of a serious-faced blonde appeared on a screen, captioned with the name "Lauren Lewis".
"Judge for yourself." Then he admitted grudgingly, "She's intelligent. For a human."

Before he could meet either Bo Dennis or her girlfriend, the Doctor had to get back to his TARDIS.
He was grateful when the Master made only a token attempt to kill him. Three-headed semi-mythical hellhounds were involved. As it turned out, they only had one head per body, but somehow managed to exist at three different locations simultaneously. Luckily for the Doctor, they had sensitive ears, and the battery on his sonic screwdriver lasted long enough for him to reach his ship.

With a tweak to the relative drift compensators, the Doctor was able to steer the TARDIS to the alternate universe's Toronto. Once the ship had landed, the Doctor tapped into the local computer databases and easily found an address for a Lauren Lewis. A short hop later, he was knocking at the door.

The woman from the picture answered. "Yes?"

"Dr. Lauren Lewis? I'm looking for Bo Dennis. She lives here?"

The woman hesitated, then nodded. "Who are you?"

"I'm called the Doctor. I'm a friend of her father's." At the sudden wariness in Dr. Lewis's face, the Doctor suspected that he shouldn't have said that. Too late now. He forged ahead, "Is she in? May I see her?"

"Hold on. I'll, um, I'll let her know you're here." Lauren ducked back inside the house. "Bo!"

The Doctor stepped into the foyer. Everything looked to be of Earth origin. No alien artifacts or anomalies. He didn't have time for a deeper inspection: Lauren was already returning, but it was the woman in front of her that the Doctor now focused on. She was human-looking, with long dark hair and a face and body that he supposed would be considered attractive. Her eyes were fixed on him with an intense, almost angry stare.

Then she broke into a warm smile and reached out to take the Doctor's hand in greeting. "Hello, I'm Bo."

The Doctor started back instinctively. "I'm not really a touching person..." but she had already caught his hand in a firm clasp. Then she stroked his skin above the wrist with her other hand. "No, wait, what are you doing..."

A flare of heat washed through him. The Doctor hastily threw up his mental shields. He should have expected the Master's daughter to be as talented in mesmerizing people as her father. Even more surprising to him was the nature of her psychic touch: while the Master's influence slithered into the mind like a constricting snake crushing all opposition, Bo's felt more like a warm orgasmic glow.

Before the Doctor could shake off the effect, something stung him in the side of the neck. Not again! he thought, twisting around to see Dr. Lewis stepping away, the empty syringe in her hand.

He woke up in a cell. No, some kind of isolation chamber in a medical laboratory, he amended once he had a chance to get a good look. The bed he had woken up on was a hospital bed. But the room was still basically a cell. The locked door gave that fact away. The Doctor was fairly sure he could break free if he needed to, but he was here to talk, and if having him locked up made them feel safer, he was willing to humor them.

Them.

The Master's daughter and her human friend were watching him from the other side of the clear polycarbonate wall that separated them. The Doctor walked over to the wall and looked back at them. They seemed nervous, but determined. The Doctor did his best to project an air of
"You said you were a friend of Jack's," began Bo.

"Jack? Jack who?"

"The one also known as Hades. My father."

"Hades? He's Hades now? What, seriously?" Then the Doctor remembered the Master referring to his lair as "Tartarus" and wondered how long he had been living this role. "Well, if we're doing Greek mythology today, I've been known as Zagreus on occasion. Not happy ones, I grant you, but..."

"So he's still alive." The two women exchanged troubled glances. Troubled, but not surprised.

"More or less. He's always been like that. I've held his ashes in my hands. Twice. Yet there he is again as large as life. You think he's dead, and next thing you know he turns up wearing a flowery hat, pretending to be a welcome droid. Forget I said that. We have enough temporal complications already."

Bo surged forward, stopping just short of the transparent wall. "Where is he? What is he planning?"

"Yes." The Doctor smiled dryly. "That's what I generally say, whenever he shows up."

"Answer the question, dammit!" Bo looked ready to break in and beat the answers out of him.

Lauren laid a calming hand on her shoulder. "Whatever it is, we can deal with it."

"Not the warmest of father-daughter relationships," remarked the Doctor. "So what exactly did he do to you?"

Bo glared. "Murdered my mother and my grandfather. Tried to use me to take over the world."

"He's always been like that, too," said the Doctor, thinking, No matter how hard I wish otherwise. And just like him to leave the Doctor to stumble blindly into the emotional aftermath. He was probably watching them from "Tartarus" and laughing. The Doctor rubbed a hand over his face, not wanting to meet Bo's furious gaze. How was he going to persuade her to help him now? He took a bundle of cue cards from his pocket and shuffled through them. Maybe one of these would help. He glanced at the words, then shoved the cards away again, burying the inexplicable sense of loss that lingered over the cards.

"Your friend?" spat Bo. "Give me one reason not to kill you right now, for the protection of my friends."

"Don't," said Lauren. "What if we can't? What if he isn't our enemy? You're not a murderer, Bo."

"I'm sorry for your loss," said the Doctor. The words came from one of the cue cards, but he understood the need for empathy. Recognized Bo's pain. He had seen it too many times before. He remembered the betrayed anguish of Chantho as she lay dying on a laboratory floor. He remembered the haunted look in Lucy Saxon's eyes when she shot her husband. Time Lords so easily destroyed those who came too close in their orbits, like a sun devouring a comet. Don't think about River in the Library. Or any of the others, including the ones he hardly knew. Missy's mocking voice echoed in his head, "All those silly people who died to keep you alive." The Doctor did his best to mitigate the damage; the Master didn't care enough to try. "But she's right. I'm not your enemy."
"Then why are you here?" demanded Bo.

The Doctor explained.

Chapter End Notes

Personally, I thought Eric Roberts played a much better Master as Hades in "Lost Girl" than he did in the 1996 Doctor Who TV movie.
Bo and Lauren sat together on the couch, sharing a pizza and watching mindless TV. By mutual agreement, they didn't talk about the prisoner who had stirred up so many old memories by his arrival on their doorstep. It had been a year since they had defeated Hades, and while there had been the usual fae politics and occasional flare-up of violence, it was nothing they couldn't handle.

The elders were unhappy with Bo, who not only continued to declare herself the Unaligned Succubus, but had inspired the entire colony in Toronto to follow suit. The wolf shifter Dyson was the natural successor to Bo's grandfather, Trick, as leader of the Light Fae, but he refused to claim the position of Ash and no one else cared to challenge him for it. The previous Morrigan remained human. Vex, her rival and likeliest candidate as successor, had disappeared on an extended road trip with Dyson's son Mark. The rest of the local Dark Fae showed no inclination to adhere to the old traditions. The blending of light and dark disturbed the fae elders, but they could do little about it. Bo's long-ago choice to live her own life was at last a reality.

But now Bo and Lauren were forced to confront the possibility that their victory had been no more than a brief reprieve. First, Bo's sister Dagny had returned with the mark of Hades glowing on her chest. And then this stranger had turned up with news of their father's survival.

The pizza was finished. The TV show was running the end credits.

Bo aimed the remote at the TV.

Lauren sighed into the ensuing silence. She brushed a stray strand of hair from her face and said reluctantly, "You first?"

Bo shook her head and smiled. "No, you first, Doctor Lewis. What did you find out? You were in your lab all day."

Lauren straightened, going into geek mode, which Bo secretly found inexpressibly endearing. "Yes, I took some samples while he was unconscious. He's definitely not human."

"So he's fae?"

"But he doesn't match any other kind of fae on record, either," said Lauren. "Now, I did manage to get hair and blood samples from your father. Compared to that, and to you, for that matter, there are some superficial similarities."

"Meaning what?"

Lauren shrugged. "Superficial. So it may not mean anything at all."
"He said he was an alien. And my father, too."

Lauren said carefully, "The current evidence does not contradict that hypothesis."

"An alien! Donald Trump was right after all: aliens are murderers and rapists." Bo stopped herself. That had come out more bitterly than she had intended. Her thoughts suddenly filled with an image of her friend Tamsin. The Valkyrie had been deceived into sleeping with Hades (who had taken the shape of Bo) and been impregnated. Childbirth was deadly to a Valkyrie, a fact Bo had not learned until it was too late.

"Bo --- " began Lauren. Her air of scientific dispassion changed to one of concern. She put her arms around her friend and held her. "Bo, don't. We beat him before. We can do it again."

"The 'power of love'," said Bo. She forced herself to shake off the bad memories.

"It is a power," said Lauren, her tone serious where Bo's was half-mocking. "I do love you."

"And I love you." Bo closed her eyes and buried her face in Lauren's embrace. She said, her voice muffled, "Don't leave me again. Please."

"I won't," promised Lauren.

"Because if you do, there isn't enough ice cream in the world," said Bo. She turned away, taking a breath and composing herself. Of course Lauren would leave her in the end. A human lifespan was short compared to that of a fae. But they both knew and accepted that. She shifted away and gestured at Lauren to continue her report. "Anyway, what else did you find out?"

"As to what powers Jack's self-proclaimed friend may or may not have, I can't be sure. Physically, he has two hearts, and a more efficient cardio-vascular system than human, as well as exhibiting signs of faster healing." Lauren concluded, "And that's about it. How about you?"

"I went to the Dal and talked to Dyson. He's never heard of any fae calling themselves just 'the Doctor'. There've been a few people called 'Doctor' this or that, and an 'il Dottore' character from 16th century Italian theatre, but definitely no one associated with Hades."

Lauren nodded. "What about that other name he used? 'Zagreus'? I checked it out on Wikipedia, but that was spectacularly unhelpful."

Bo shook her head. "Nothing. Didn't ring a bell with Dyson, or anyone else at the Dal." The Irish-themed pub, now run by Dyson after Trick's death, served as the local hub of fae activity, both Light and Dark.

"So you hit the books?"

"Studying was never my strong suit, but yes." Bo had spent the rest of the day consulting Trick's old books of fae lore. "There was one mention of 'Zagreus'."

"Associated with doom and apocalypse?"

"Judge for yourself." Bo pulled out a memo pad and quoted from her notes. "In 1912, a drunken oracle, on a bet to write out from memory Lewis Carroll's nonsense poem, 'The Walrus and the Carpenter', substituted 'Zagreus' and 'the Yssgaroth' for every mention of the Walrus and the Carpenter respectively. They asked her about it once she was sober again, but she claimed not to remember a thing. The archivist got ahold of the paper and filed it just in case. Nothing's ever come of it."
Lauren frowned. "The Walrus and the Carpenter'? I remember reading it in school when I had to write an essay on Lewis Carroll. Um, isn't that the one which ends up with all the poor oysters being eaten?"

Bo nodded. "Yeah."

"That doesn't sound promising," said Lauren. "Any mentions of 'the Doctor' in the lore books?"

"Nope." Bo smiled. "As far as the legends of the fae go, you are the definitive Doctor."

"I'm not egotistical enough to claim to be the definitive anything," said Lauren. She stood up and began clearing the empty cans and dirty napkins from the living room.

Bo moved in to help. She picked up the empty pizza box. "The question is, how far can we trust him? He says he has a plan to banish Jack from this universe. He just needs the music box Jack gave me."

"Mmm," said Lauren. "I remember Jack said it could only be used once, and you used it on the Nyx."

"He was lying," Bo pointed out. "About everything."

"Which doesn't mean the Doctor is being honest." Lauren washed her hands in the kitchen sink. "Except about Jack planning something evil. We all saw his hand print on your sister. If the Doctor can help us... we might need every bit of help we can get." Her mouth quirked slightly. "What's that saying about a gift horse?"

"Hey!" Bo punched Lauren's arm in mock-anger. "Just say no to horse metaphors?"

"Sorry."

"Trust but verify," decided Bo. "That's a proverb I can get behind."

By the time they got to Trick's old lair beneath the Dal, it had become a circus.

Seeing Bo come in outfitted with her full arsenal of knives and swords, Dyson immediately invited himself along as a backup. Bo bit off her initial refusal, thinking that after all, another pair of watchful eyes couldn't hurt. And his lupine senses might detect what she and Lauren could not.

Bo introduced him to the Doctor. She watched the ensuing duel of suspicious eyebrows with amusement. She broke in at last, "Ok, enough. It's been a long day. Let's go."

At which point Dagny got wind of their activity and wormed her way up to Bo's side. "What's up, sis? Is this, like, one of your famous succubus orgies? Can I watch?"

At which Lauren choked, slapping a palm over her face to cover her embarrassment. "Oh, god. I don't believe this."

Bo sighed and gave Dagny a stern look. "One, you're too young." Accelerated growth meant that Tamsin's daughter, Bo's half-sister, looked like a teenager even though she was really only about a year old. "Two, it's not an orgy. Three, this could be dangerous. So you're still too young."

"I'm a Valkyrie," protested Dagny. "I can handle danger."
"'Valkyrie'?" muttered the Doctor skeptically. "This gets better and better."

Bo shot him an irritated look, then said to Dagny. "You may be a Valkyrie, but have you come into your full powers yet? No?"

Dagny stretched out her fingers and wiggled them, eyes narrowed as she concentrated. A shadow flickered over her face, but it was gone almost before Bo had noticed it. "I...damn. Almost! I almost had it."

Bo rolled her eyes. "So, that's a 'no.' No."

But Dagny only seemed spurred on by the hint of danger. "Oh come on. Please? Please please please? Don't you trust me? Aren't we sisters? Please please please?"

"It's not that," said Bo, annoyed at the hurt expression creeping into her sister's face. She took a deep breath, casting about for a diplomatic refusal.

"It's all right," said Dyson. "I can look after her."

At which point Bo resigned herself to the circus. "Ok, fine. I guess you've done all right so far. With the looking-after. Let's go."

It transpired that the magic music box was in an auxiliary storage room opening off the main room of Trick's old lair. It was more a large closet than a room, and there was no way to fit everyone in. Bo and Lauren wound up doing the searching, while Dyson and Dagny stood at the doorway. The Doctor wandered around, picking up this and putting down that until Dyson ordered him to stop.

Bo didn't pay them any more attention after that, trusting Dyson to keep the Doctor out of trouble. It didn't take long to find the music box. Bo picked it up and returned to the main room. "Here it is."

He stared at it through his sunglasses. His sunglasses which made a weird whining noise. Another magical artifact, guessed Bo. She turned to ask Lauren about it, but she was still in the storage room. "Lauren?"

"Just a second," came the reply. "I found this box with my name on the label." Lauren reappeared with a cardboard box. She set it down on the floor and rummaged through it. It was less than half full, with papers and envelopes. "I think it's from the offices of the old Ash, the one I originally worked for." She waved a sheaf of papers. "Copies of my old tax returns." She set the papers aside and delved deeper into the box. "All this must have been passed along to Trick."

"And then to Dyson," said Bo, looking over at him.

Dyson shrugged. "I've never enjoyed paperwork."

Lauren took out a sheet. "Not just paper. This is real parchment. See? You can feel it." She rubbed her fingers on it.

"The fae can be old-fashioned," admitted Dyson. "So what does it say?"

"I don't know. I don't recognize the language." She started to show it to Dyson, then said, "Oh wait, the other side is in English."

Bo came to read it over her shoulder. Dagny and the Doctor drifted up behind Bo and peered around her in turn. Bo waved them away impatiently. "It's a contract. A bunch of legalese. Aren't you
supposed to be working on the music box, Doctor?"

The Doctor grumbled and returned to his work. He fiddled with the box with a wand of some kind. It blinked and warbled shrilly. Bo was reminded of Ryan, the dark fae she had once dated: he had been fond of high tech gizmos, too. She hoped the Doctor did not share Ryan's fondness for mischief as well.

Apparently bored with trying to read the small print on Lauren's contract, Dagny turned to watch the Doctor. "What the hell are you trying to do with that thing?"

The Doctor didn't answer.

Lauren was still puzzling over her parchment. "I don't remember signing this. But I suppose I must have, when I entered the Ash's service."

"Don't worry about it. It's all void now," Dyson reassured her. He glanced at the contract, flipped it back and forth. "Strange. I don't recognize the language either."

Lauren squatted back down next to the cardboard box and fished out a letter-size envelope. Something heavy slid inside it. Lauren opened the flap and took out a flat, round metallic device attached to a chain. "Huh. What do you think?" She handed it to Bo. "An antique?"

"Family heirloom?" Bo tested its weight. It had strange circular designs etched into the front. "I think it's supposed to open. It looks like one of those old-fashioned watches. You know, the ones you carry around in your pocket. Is it yours, Lauren?" She handed it back.

Lauren rocked back on her heels. She let the chain trail through her fingers, the watch swinging on the end. She had a puzzled, lost look on her face, almost as if listening for something just beneath the threshold of hearing. She said slowly, "I... I don't know. I don't remember it, but it seems... familiar?"

Bo glanced back, meaning to ask Dyson if he knew anything about it. She found that the Doctor and Dagny were both staring at Lauren, with similar shocked expressions on their faces. "What? What's wrong?"

"It's a fob watch," the Doctor said, not taking his eyes off Lauren. "Open it."

Bo tensed, hearing the urgency in his voice. She covered Lauren's hand with her own. "No, don't. It could be a trap."

"If it is, it's one you set for yourself, Dr. Lewis," said the Doctor.

"And years old," Lauren pointed out. She gently lifted Bo's hand away. "No, it does belong to me. That's why it was in this box." She held the fob watch in her palm, studying the designs etched into its surface. "It's not going to explode or anything."

"You never know," said Dagny. She backed away to the doorway, as if that would shelter her.

Dyson frowned, bracing himself, though he did not move to stop Lauren.

Bo hovered protectively over Lauren. "We can check Trick's books first. Or if you want, I can open it first, in case it's booby-trapped."

"It's not," said Lauren, sounding more sure of herself now. Before anyone could utter any more objections, Lauren flipped open the cover of the fob watch.
No one breathed.

A wisp of golden light spiraled up out of the opened watch. Then another, and another. They seemed to whisper secrets, secrets meant for only one pair of ears.

Lauren gasped in shock. The watch slipped from her hand, but the light only increased in strength.

"Lauren!" Bo, heart pounding in terror that her girlfriend had loosed some deadly curse, reached for her to pull her away. Lauren did not resist, but distance made no difference: the light unerringly sought her out.

And then it was done. The cover snapped itself shut again. The light went dark.

Something was wrong with Lauren. Bo sensed it instinctively. She helped Lauren up, but when she turned to face her, Bo saw a stranger looking back. The features were the same, but held... differently. Bo remembered with horror the way that Zee and Heratio had possessed their human hosts. "Lauren!"

And Lauren (not Lauren) stared back at Bo, speaking with Lauren's voice, but in a colder inflection than the human doctor had ever used with Bo. "No. I am... not Lauren Lewis."

Bo recoiled at the tone. Then fury filled her, and determination that she would get Lauren back. From whoever this was. "Who are you?"

"I... I was Lauren. But that is not me. I am, I am..." Lauren (not Lauren) hesitated, her expression unreadable.

"The Rani!" the Doctor leaped up and finished the sentence for her. "She's the Rani."

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry to do this to Lauren, as I love her as a kick-ass human character. However, once I saw Hades as the Master (because Eric Roberts), it was obvious that Lauren was a fob-watched Rani. And once I saw that, I couldn't unsee it. So here we are (even though another Doccubus break-up is the last thing we need!)
"The Rani?" echoed Bo in disbelief, but whoever it was that had taken over Lauren, she did not deny it. The Rani, then. A name for Bo to focus her hate on. Two names. The Rani and the Doctor: the ones who had stolen the life of the person she loved most in the world.

The Rani glanced over at the Doctor. "I knew you'd show up here, sooner or later. Where is he?"

"Around, somewhere. They said you were dead. In the war." The Doctor's tone was neutral.

The Rani shrugged. "Obviously not." She turned to Bo. "Bo --- " But whatever she was going to say was interrupted by the sound of a scuffle at the doorway.

"What the hell?" It was Dagny's voice, raised in surprise and anger.

Bo turned to find Dagny facing off against...another Dagny. One tried to push her way in while the other tried to push her way out of Trick's lair. They glared at each other with nigh-identical looks of anger and suspicion. "Shit. Now what?"

"It's your father," said the Rani. "He can take the shape of anyone of his own blood, remember?"

Bo remembered. He had done it to her, before. But if the Rani remembered, that must mean that Lauren was still in there. "Lauren..."

But the other woman didn't respond.

"Which one is which?" Dyson stared at the two Dagny's, nostrils flared as if he was trying to sniff out the difference.

"The one who was in here with us all along," said the Doctor. He pointed his wand at the "Dagny" trying to push her way out of the room. "That's 'Hades'."

That Dagny turned towards the Doctor. "What, you're going to shoot me with your sonic screwdriver? It's not a weapon. This, however, is." "Dagny" morphed suddenly into the form of Hades. Taking advantage of their brief moment of shock, he grabbed the real Dagny around the neck with one arm. With his other hand, he pressed a pistol up under her jaw. "Party's over."

"Let go of me, you asshole!" Dagny's voice trembled, but she still sounded defiant. Then Hades whispered something in her ear. His grip tightened. Dagny squeaked, swallowing the remainder of her angry words. Her eyes glazed over and her body gave no more resistance.

Bo stood frozen, struggling with the impulse to attack. She had drawn her sword automatically, but didn't dare risk Dagny's life. Her eyes flickered to the others. She could see Dyson struggling with the same impulse.

The Rani's face gave nothing away. She said, as if stating a bit of scientific trivia, "Dagny is a Valkyrie. If you shoot her, she'll simply be reborn into her next life a little early."

Hades grinned. "Ah, but she's young. Hasn't come into her powers yet. Isn't that right, Bo?"

Bo could hardly deny it. She gritted her teeth. "What do you want, Jack?"

Hades nodded towards the Doctor. "His TARDIS."
"His what?" Bo glanced at the Doctor.

The Doctor said tightly, "My ship. He wants out. Of course."

"Well, Doctor? Or do you want to see this poor girl's brains splattered onto the ceiling?"

"She's your daughter!" However evil her father was, Bo couldn't help hoping, in some dark corner of her heart, that he was capable of family feeling. Wrong again. Her fingers twitched on the hilt of her sword.

Hades smiled. "There's plenty more where she came from."

"You're sick!" said Bo in utter disgust.

"It has been said." Hades sounded almost proud of it. "But I'll let her go, if the Doctor cooperates."

"And I'll be trapped here, while you're free to terrorize the universe. I don't think so," said the Doctor.

"Call the Time Lords for help. You've done it before," sneered Hades.

"That was a long time ago," said the Doctor. "I had no choice."

"And you don't have one now," said Dyson. The wolf raged in his eyes as he loomed menacingly over the Doctor. "Do what he says."

"Don't threaten me." The Doctor's tone held disdain but no fear. "I can't allow the Master to have my TARDIS."

"Doctor --- " started Bo, then stopped, thinking that if the Doctor was anything like Jack, appealing to his humanity would be futile. She tried anyway. "Just go along with him. Just for now. Please."

"He will," said the Rani. She turned her gaze to the Doctor. "You're a sentimental fool and we all know it, so will you two stop this idiotic game and just get on with it?" Her voice held no fear, either, only exasperation.

The Doctor grimaced. After a moment, he nodded. "All right." He slipped his wand back into his pocket and gestured towards the door. "I parked her near Dr. Lewis's house." He glanced at the Rani, then sighed. "You know, I liked Dr. Lauren Lewis."

The Rani didn't deign to answer.

"Let's go," said Hades. Dragging Dagny with him, never letting the gun lose contact with her skin, he led their procession out of Trick's lair, then through the Dal and out onto the streets. "A lovely night for a stroll."

Not just a stroll, but a bus ride as well. The bus was nearly empty this late at night. Neither the driver nor the few other passengers seemed to notice the tension in their group, not to mention the pistol Hades kept pressed against Dagny.

"Psychically-induced perception damping," muttered the Doctor, noting Bo's confusion. "He was always good at telepathy and hypnosis. Don't expect any intervention from bystanders."

"Stop it," said the Rani, overhearing them. "She's not one of your human companions."

Hades glanced over his shoulder at them, an eyebrow raised. "Jealous, my dear 'Lauren'?"
"Hardly," said the Rani flatly. "Lauren was a convenience, nothing more."

Bo turned away. She couldn't bear to see that cold expression on Lauren's face. In her heart she screamed, No! It was more than that. It had to be.

"And me? I suppose I'm just a 'convenience' to you as well," said Hades.

"I did hope to hitch a ride out of this universe, yes," admitted the Rani. "And better you than the Doctor. I assume you at least have no interest in taking part in a tedious war with genocidal pepper-pots?"

"No," said Hades. "But I had heard that you were working for the High Council."

"I was drafted," said the Rani stiffly. "And trapped on a space station. What else could I do?"

"But the space station was blown up by the Daleks," said the Doctor. "Ah. You took the opportunity to escape. Used a chameleon arch... I assume to throw off any pursuit?"

The Rani nodded. "But it's been years, relative time. They won't pursue the dead."

"How long have you been here? On Earth?" Bo realized as the question left her mouth that sometime in the past half hour she had come to believe in their alien origins. Was it really any weirder than the existence of the fae themselves, or the underworld, or the mythical realm of the Ancients?

"Since I started working for the Ash," said the Rani. "It was a useful cover, and I could continue my research even while in human form."

"And Nadia?" Bo thought of Lauren's previous girlfriend. She had been cursed into a comatose state when Bo had first met Lauren. Nadia had later woken, only to fall victim to the Garuda's evil. Was that more merciful than learning that your lover was only an illusion?

"A stranger. The relationship was inserted into my history to lend verisimilitude to Lauren's identity."

The Rani's calm tone didn't falter as she explained, "Her death was not my intention."

It had been Bo's hand on the blade that ultimately killed Nadia. Killed her to save Lauren. All for nothing.

"And our relationship? Was that..." Bo couldn't bear to say it. She felt that a knife was stabbing her own heart. All of Lauren's warmth was gone, leaving only this unreadable alien. Her aura was a blank, just like that of Hades or the Doctor.

"A pleasant diversion," said the Rani. "Human emotions are...interesting."

"'Interesting'?" Bo's voice broke. "What we had was real. Deep down, you know it, too. Please, Lauren. I know you're still in there..."

The Rani shook her head. "Enough. You'll forget Lauren soon enough. You still have the wolf to keep your bed warm."

Bo didn't look at Dyson. She kept her eyes on the Rani. "I chose you. You will always have my heart."

"Very touching," said Hades, "if you enjoy soap opera. Doctor, this is our stop. No one try anything stupid."

Bo followed the Rani off the bus, still hoping to reach Lauren. She had to keep trying, in case
Lauren was able to hear her. Maybe, maybe she could break free. But the Rani didn't turn around, didn't look at Bo again.

"Here's Dr. Lewis's house," said the Master. "Where's your TARDIS?" He nudged Dagny with the gun, reminding them of the urgency of their quest.

"Over here," said the Doctor. He led them to a side street a block away. A tall blue box, about the size of a phone booth, stood on the sidewalk next to a street lamp.

"That's a spaceship?" said Dyson disbelievingly.

"A piece of antiquated junk, but the technology is still more advanced than anything you'll see for the next thousand years," said the Rani. She approached Hades. "Take me with you. This is the Doctor's TARDIS. I'm sure it's in need of repairs. With my help you have a better chance of actually landing where you want to go."

Hades considered this for a moment, then nodded. "What the hell. All right." He turned to the Doctor. "The key, Doctor."

The Doctor reached reluctantly into his pockets. He slowly pulled out a key, his eyes darting around as if searching for some last-minute distraction. But in the end he held it up. "Here."

Hades loosed his grip around Dagny's neck to reach forward for the key. Dagny, her eyes still blank and hypnotized, made no move to resist or flee.

But the Rani, who was standing right next to Hades, whipped her hand up and knocked his arm free, the one holding the gun. She stepped in front of him and shoved Dagny away. "Dagny! Run!"

Dyson reacted first, grabbing Dagny to pull her out of the way while the Rani and Hades wrestled for control of the pistol. The battle could only end badly for the Rani: Hades was the stronger and better versed in combat. The Rani was no more practiced at physical struggle than Lauren was.

"Lauren!" Bo rushed to join the fray.

In the confusion, the pistol was knocked free. It skittered away along the pavement...

...to be picked up by Dagny. Dagny, who aimed the gun in a two-handed grip not at Hades, but at Dyson. And pulled the trigger.

Dyson staggered back and fell, his cry of shock echoed by Bo and the Rani.

Dagny met Hades's eyes over Dyson's fallen body. Obeying some silent order, she turned her hands and put the muzzle of the gun in her own mouth. The hand print, the mark of Hades, glowed through the fabric of her shirt.

"Touch me again and she dies," said Hades. "Doctor, the key."

"Dyson!" Bo rushed to help Dyson.

The Rani was close on her heels. She knelt next to Dyson and began undoing his shirt to expose the wound. "Sorry. I'm sorry," she said as she inspected his chest. "We have to stop the bleeding. Bo, call the clinic."

"You'll be ok, we're here," murmured Bo, but she had seen enough people die to recognize the gravity of Dyson's injury. She fumbled for her phone and called the fae medical clinic, quickly
explaining their situation. "They say ten to fifteen minutes. How is he?" She knelt down on the other side, holding Dyson's hand.

He didn't speak. His breathing sounded shallow, too rapid.

The Rani was pressing her hands on Dyson's chest, doing her best to staunch the bleeding. She said softly, "His right lung has collapsed. He's losing a lot of blood..."

A loud, unearthly noise filled the air: a creaking, groaning wail that sounded like nothing Bo had ever heard before.

"The TARDIS!" said the Rani. She looked up from Dyson. Bo followed her gaze to see that Hades was gone, as was the blue box.

The Doctor stood to one side, supporting Dagny in his arms. He had somehow extracted the gun from her and tossed it to the ground behind him. He peered into her eyes, saying, "Dagny. Dagny! Time to snap out of it."

"Huh?" Dagny stumbled back, shaking off the Doctor's loose grip. "What the hell? What happened? I swear, I'm gonna kill that..." She winced and clutched at her chest, where the glowing handprint was gradually fading. "Ow." She sat heavily on the curb and shivered, arms clutched around herself. "Damn."

The Doctor gave her one last assessing glance. "She'll be all right." Then he turned back to face the others. "The one who was shot. How is he?"

The Rani gave a small headshake. "The bullet did a lot of damage. It doesn't look good."

"It was just a distraction." The Doctor frowned at the empty spot where the blue box had stood. "He's gone now."

No. This was not happening. Bo looked at the Doctor's uncaring face. He was responsible for all this, with his supposed "plan". First Lauren, and now Dyson. No. Bo leaped furiously to her feet. She could fix one thing, at least. She just needed to take the chi, the life energy, from the Doctor, and use it to heal Dyson.

Feeling her eyes taking on a hellish blue glow, Bo stood straight, facing the Doctor with both hands outstretched, palms upward, fingers bent into claws. She opened her mouth and breathed in. Tendrils of blue light tore free from the Doctor's body and spiraled towards Bo.

"No, stop!" The two words were all the Doctor managed before he fell onto his knees, all the strength sapped from his body.
"Sometimes, the greatest evil is the greatest mercy." --- Hades (End of Faes)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Bo inhaled the Doctor's chi. It was only a thin stream at first, but soon his defenses would crumble and his life would be hers.

The Doctor reached with trembling fingers into his pocket and retrieved his wand. He pressed a control. The air shrilled.

Bo's vision blurred. Then the stream of chi cut off. Bo narrowed her eyes, trying to renew her grip on the Doctor's life force, but it had vanished. "What the fuck?" She moved towards him, intending to physically grab him and suck out his chi that way.

Panting in exertion, the Doctor used his hands to push off the ground. He scrambled halfway to his feet, launching himself out of her way --- in three different directions. No. There were now three of him.

Illusions, thought Bo. She drew her sword and slashed it all around her in a sweeping motion. Whichever one bled, that would be the real Doctor.

Three Doctors ducked and rolled away.

"I can keep this up all night," gasped one of the Doctors. Another one said, "I learned this trick from a dog. I know it's usually the other way around, but..." The third one concluded, "You had me locked up for hours. I was bored."

Infuriated, Bo redoubled her attack, but the Doctor avoided her with surprising agility.

"Stop! Stop it, Bo." That was Lauren's voice, repeating the words over and over again until they penetrated Bo's fog of anger.

"What?"

"We don't have time for this. Dyson doesn't have time." Lauren (or was it the Rani?) reached out for Bo's hand, the one holding the sword. "Bo, you can use my chi."

"Lauren?" Bo met her eyes, trying to see the soul behind the familiar gaze. The Rani (or was it Lauren?) reached out with her other hand to cup it around Bo's head and pulled her close. And then their lips met, and Bo was drawing the chi from the Rani's mouth. The lips were cooler than Lauren's. Her chi tasted of age, of moments piled one on top of another in a thick brew that was nothing human and nothing fae.

It wasn't Lauren. Bo wept inside, but she couldn't afford to think about it now. She harvested the chi, stopping herself only when the Rani was on the brink of unconsciousness. Letting the Rani slump to the ground, Bo turned her attention to Dyson. Thank the gods he was still alive. She knelt next to him, taking his hands in hers and faced him. She channeled the chi into his body. To her relief, his wound closed itself and his breathing grew easier.

Dyson's hands gripped hers. "Bo. Thank you." Then he tried to sit up. "Dagny. Where's Dagny? Is she...?"
"I'm fine," said Dagny. She got up from the curb where she had been sitting and strolled over. "I'm not the one who got shot. Sorry about that, by the way."

"It wasn't your fault," said Dyson.

"You were under Jack's control," said Bo. "I know how that feels."

"Yeah, this mind control shit really fucks with your head," said Dagny. "But he's gone now, right? You guys killed him or something? Everything's all fuzzy. Whoa..." She closed her eyes, massaging them with her fingers.

"No. He's not dead. He took my TARDIS," said the Doctor. There was only one of him again, but he maintained a wary distance from the others.

The Rani, who was sitting on the grass near Dyson, lifted her head from her knees. "Then he'll have escaped this universe. Nothing to be done about it now. A pity." She turned towards Bo. "You didn't kill me. Thank you for that."

"You have Lauren to thank for your life," said Bo bitterly. "She was the one who taught me how to limit my feeding."

The Rani looked down. She said, distantly, "Lauren Lewis contained as much of me as could be fit in a human. Her memories are not mine and her past is a fiction, but there is a... resonance."

"'Resonance'? What the hell does that mean?" demanded Bo. "And what about all that you said to Jack about Lauren being a mere 'convenience'?"

The Rani sighed, not meeting Bo's eyes. "I needed him to believe me so that I could get close enough to free Dagny. I'm sorry it turned out the way it did."

"Yeah, so am I," said Bo. "If you want to make it up to me, be Lauren again. Not the damned 'Rani'. Whoever that is."

The Rani shook her head. "I'm sorry."

"And you." Bo stalked towards the Doctor, torn between rage and grief. "What about your plan? What happened to that?"

The Doctor backed away. "I'm not sure yet. We wait."

"Wait?" Bo glared at him. "What if Jack comes back?"

"I'm hoping he doesn't."

"Doctor." It was the Rani. "Doctor, what have you done?"

Bo saw a guilty expression cross the Doctor's face, before he smoothed it out. "I did what I had to do," he said.

For the Master, stepping into the Doctor's TARDIS was like crawling onto the beach after a millennium spent floating in the ocean. Time turned thin, restored here to the "normal" flow of time he was native to. The years dragged as cruelly as gravity on his flesh; decay started at the edges and worked its way to the core.

This body would not last, but it didn't matter. The Master, now that he had a TARDIS, had his pick
of all of time and space to steal a new shape. Meanwhile, he would survive through sheer tenacity and force of will. By now, that was nothing new to him.

Plans blossomed in his head as he moved around the console, setting coordinates. First he would stop off at Tartarus to pick up his equipment. Then he would bid farewell to the name of "Hades" and this sideshow of a universe. He hit the dematerialization switch.

Lost in anticipation of new schemes and potential conquests, the Master didn't notice until too late that there was a teleportation unit hooked up underneath the console. Even as the TARDIS dematerialized, the teleportation beam engulfed the Master.

He stared in horror at the blinking indicator light.

Then the light vanished, and he found himself standing inside a cylindrical teleport station. He shoved the door open and stepped out onto a dusty floor. He was alone in a circular chamber furnished with a curious mix of antique stone and technologically advanced teleportation equipment. The Master picked up a handful of dust and let it trickle through his fingers. The place looked like it had been abandoned for eons. The banks of equipment were rusted and crumbling. The air smelled of salt and loneliness.

Hell.

"Doctor." The Master spoke aloud, not caring if anyone was listening. "If you think I am trapped, then you are wrong. I will escape and I will have my revenge. And if you aren't afraid, you're too stupid to live."

The Master circled the room, noting the condition of the equipment. "I will destroy you..." The Master smashed a fist through a console. Metal disintegrated into a shower of thin flakes. Delicate circuitry dissolved into sparkling dust. "...destroy you utterly."

The ambulance sent by the fae medical clinic arrived at last. Even though Dyson and Dagny claimed to be completely healthy now, the paramedics insisted on taking them back to the clinic for a more thorough examination.

The Doctor refused to leave the spot where his ship had been parked.

Not trusting him, Bo elected to stay behind and keep watch on him. She moved a short distance away to lean against the hood of a car parked along the street. She crossed her arms across her chest, shivering a little as the night turned chilly, as it did even now in late spring.

The Rani stayed behind as well, not bothering to articulate a reason. She only gave Bo a long, unreadable look before shaking her head and going over to talk to the Doctor.

Whether they were friends or enemies, Bo could see that they were old acquaintances. They spoke together with the kind of easy understanding that sprang from long familiarity. The kind of understanding that had only begun to develop between Bo and Lauren.

Bo turned away, finding it too painful to watch. Even so, fragments of conversation drifted within her hearing.

"How did you do that, with three of you?"

"Time is thick here. Malleable. You probably didn't notice when you were human," said the Doctor.
After a moment, the Rani said, "I see what you mean. Interesting."

"It was simply a matter of dividing my timeline three ways and pulling all three strands into the same reality."

Then their voices became too low for Bo to make out. Some time after that, Bo heard footsteps approaching. She saw out of the corner of her eye that it was the Rani, but Bo refused to look or speak to her.

The Rani leaned against the car next to Bo, close enough to touch, but far enough away to ignore. "Hey."

Bo said nothing.

"Bo." The Rani persisted, "Bo, listen to me. What we had was real, it wasn't a lie. It just wasn't the whole truth."

Bo didn't answer, but she couldn't suppress the surge of hope that betrayed her determination to hate these people, these people who had erased Lauren as easily as brushing away a dream. Just then, the Rani had sounded exactly like Lauren.

"Bo. I'm a Time Lord, from the planet Gallifrey. So are the Doctor and your father. The Doctor told you that before. It's true. In many ways, we resemble humans. In others..." The Rani paused. Then, "It was something of a humbling experience to become human. I wonder if the Doctor or your father have ever tried it?"

Bo still didn't look at her, but she tilted her head, showing that she was listening.

"We were students together at the Time Lord Academy, a long time ago. And now we are all renegades, together or separately." The Rani laughed a little. "So you see, just like 'Karen Beattie', I really do have a criminal background." She meant Lauren's supposed "real identity" as a fugitive eco-terrorist.

"Were the three of you friends?" Bo unbent enough to ask a question. She wanted to believe that Lauren still lived, somehow, inside this stranger. If that was true, then it wouldn't matter that she was an alien. All that mattered was the truth of the relationship between them.

"I have had allies, servitors, and experimental subjects. Not friends," said the Rani. "I didn't want friends. I saw how friendship poisoned the relationship between your father and the Doctor."

"Friendship? Or love?" Bo had seen the way Hades and the Doctor had looked at each other. She had heard a hint of --- something --- beneath their words, even though the two had never so much as touched each other in her presence. As a succubus, she was sensitive to all shades of desire. And now she hoped to find it in the Rani (could she be Lauren?), but was afraid to look and find it absent. She glanced sidewise at the woman beside her.

"I don't know if Time Lords experience love in the way of a human, or even a fae." The Rani's brows constricted. "When I was Lauren...when I was Lauren, I thought I understood love. That I loved you. I can still remember that feeling."

"But it's not what you feel, now?"

"I don't know."
Hate.

Hate was universal. Hate was what kept the Master clinging to life when by all the laws of biology he should be no more than a decaying husk littering the floor.

The Master oozed out of the corpse that he had worn for so many years that he had forgotten it was not his own body. Now reduced to a translucent serpent of alien ectoplasm, he slithered through his prison, searching for any escape.

It was a castle that rose out of an endless sea, a castle nearly as decrepit as the flesh he had discarded. Day and night passed unmarked by any change. The stars were dim, dying sparks in an unfamiliar sky. In all his exploration, the Master encountered no other life. Sometimes he caught the Doctor's scent still lingering in the dirt, in the stones, but it was a faded remnant of someone long gone.

Of someone hated.

When he found all other thoughts too painful to contemplate, the Master huddled around a core of hatred, a hatred intense enough to be indistinguishable from love.

He would endure. He lost track of the time, but never of his hate.

It didn't matter how long it took. He would find a way.

A way out.

There was no way out of the Time War.

Deep in the secret chambers of the Celestial Intervention Agency of Gallifrey, Coordinator Narvin received report after report of disaster, of dead agents, of loss after failure after loss. The few victories were soon swallowed up by the defeats that overtook them.

The internal reports were hardly better: relations with the Lord President were deteriorating day by day. And the High Council was packed with Rassilon's cronies. They were the faction that had ousted President Romana back in the early days of the war and voted for the resurrection of the legendary Founder. The CIA, backing Romana, had opposed that desperate measure, but achieved nothing by their opposition except a drastic decline in their own influence.

Narvin needed something, anything: a better weapon, a better agent, a better plan. Whatever could lift the CIA from its mire of futile irrelevance. He sat at his desk, the picture of futile irrelevance, paging through his gloomy piles of reports. What he didn't need was an interruption from one of the junior agents banging at his office door.

"Sir! Coordinator Narvin, sir!" The junior agent rushed through his message, stumbling over the words. Apparently, an unauthorized time capsule had been detected. It was impossible for it to break through the CIA's temporal barriers, yet it was happening, had happened, would happen. It was about to materialize in one of the CIA's secret landing ports.

Narvin was about to say something rude, when the junior agent added, "It's a Type 40."

"What!" Narvin jumped up, rounding his desk and striding off, sweeping the junior agent up in his wake. "Come on."
Running pell-mell into the underblocks, Narvin arrived at the landing port just in time to see the fading shape of a blue box. "Doctor! Wait!"

But it was gone already.

"Damn that man," said Narvin. "What is he up to now? What was he doing here? I thought Cardinal Ollistra sent him on a mission to the Null Zone?" Privately he wondered if that was yet another ploy by Rassilon to get rid of his political obstacles. Was this some counter-ploy by the Doctor? It was enough to make his stomach hurt.

"He's left something behind," said the junior agent. He stepped cautiously forward and bent down to pick something up from the floor. Then his voice turned puzzled. "It's a confession dial. It's...the Doctor's! It's awfully worn down, like it's been through a battle."

But when Narvin had the dial scanned properly, it revealed that the Time Lord inside was not the Doctor, but rather the Master.

"The Master! Well, well, well." Narvin rubbed his hands together, thinking. "The Master. We can do something with the Master."

With any luck, it would give the CIA the edge they so desperately needed.

Bo stared in bemusement at the Doctor. His reaction when his blue box reappeared out of the thin air was to run to it and fling his arms around it. "Is he... is he hugging that box? Is there something I should know?" She glanced towards the Rani for enlightenment.

The Rani rolled her eyes and twirled a finger next to her ear. "The Doctor has always been eccentric, even by Gallifreyan standards."

The Doctor leaned his forehead against the wooden panels and murmured to his ship. Bo strained to hear his words. "...did it. Thank you, old girl."

The Rani stepped towards him. "Doctor, what did you do with the Master?"

The Doctor straightened, turned to look at the Rani. "The TARDIS dropped him off on Gallifrey."

"Gallifrey! But Gallifrey's been under a level ten security lockdown since the war. You have the pass codes? Were you sent by the CIA after all?"

"No," said the Doctor. "It took her seven years to break through, but the TARDIS managed it in the end."

"Impossible," scoffed the Rani. "Without a pilot on board?"

"It's because there wasn't a pilot on board. She could take extreme evasive measures without worrying about killing me."

The Rani nodded. After a pause, she said, "They'll send him into the war."

"I know," said the Doctor. He looked at her, then at Bo. "I doubt he'll ever return here. So there's that."

"Good," said Bo. She hoped he was right.
The Doctor said to the Rani, "What about you? Do you still want a ride out of here?"

The Rani considered.

No, thought Bo. Her breath caught. You can't leave me again. But she couldn't get the words out. She felt as if her heart had stopped.

Then the Rani stepped back. Next to Bo. "No. I... Lauren made a promise. And I can't take Bo into the Time War."

The Doctor nodded. Without another word, he stepped into his box. A moment later, the box vanished again, leaving only echoes and a swirl of wind behind.

Bo turned to face the Rani, reaching to grasp her right hand in both of hers. She didn't know what to say to this person who was and wasn't the friend she had grown to love. "Lauren --- "

The Rani (Lauren?) quickly raised her free hand to Bo's lips, stopping her from finishing the sentence. "Bo, I'm not Lauren. But it's possible that Lauren is me. Do you understand?"

She did. She didn't. Bo met the Rani's eyes, questioning.

"Things can't go back to the way they were before. But if you can accept me, this me..." The Rani paused, showing more uncertainty than she had since she opened the fob watch. She took a breath, then said, "If you are willing to try. With me. Will you?"

"I don't...I..." Bo stammered, her voice trailing off. Then she realized that her decision was already made. When had things ever been easy or simple between them? It would never stop them from trying. She reached for her friend and pulled her into a tight embrace. "Yes."

Chapter End Notes

Obviously, this is my personal interpretation of the Time War, which borrows elements from the TV show, books, and Big Finish audios, but isn't exactly compliant with official continuity! (Not to mention sticking the "Lost Girl" universe into it somehow.)
"He's a Time Lord. In many ways, we have the same mind." --- The Doctor (Logopolis)

Chapter Notes

Torture and hurt/comfort, Missy style

"This is an ancillary power station. It's not a dungeon cell," the Doctor wanted to say, but couldn't, because he had been gagged with a strip of duct tape over his mouth. Gagged, and bound with wrists tied behind his back. The rope pulled relentlessly upwards: he was strung up to a metal beam, his feet a few inches above the floor. Classic strappado technique, he noted through the excruciation of his dislocated arms. Sweat beaded on his forehead and he was finding it hard to think clearly. He forced himself to concentrate.

Looking to the right, he saw a medieval-looking wooden rack. Looking to the left, he saw a Catherine wheel. Someone had replaced the furniture in the room with torture devices. He didn't have to ask who was responsible.

She was standing right there, back turned to him, fiddling with the music box the Doctor had fetched from the other universe. The moment he had stepped out of his TARDIS to meet her, Missy had stunned him with a shot from her device, the one that resembled a 21st century human's smartphone (except with additional offensive options). She had changed out of her zybanium/zero-matter armor into something closer to her Mary Poppins, Queen of Evil (et cetera) outfit, complete with umbrella (currently propped up against a wall) and elaborate hairdo. Evidence enough that the Doctor was able to guess even in his pain-hazed state that he must have been unconscious for quite some time.

The outfit wasn't surprising: even the Doctor wasn't sure of the contents of his wardrobes after a few millenia of trawling through all of spacetime. But where had she found torture equipment in the Doctor's TARDIS, items he was fairly sure he hadn't stocked himself? Either she had bullied the TARDIS architectural circuits into reconfiguring the room, or worse, the TARDIS was upset at what the Doctor had done, in which case this was deliberate punishment. He sent a query through his link with the ship, but her only response was a sulky silence.

Perhaps sensing his thoughts, Missy turned, leaving the music box plugged into the power station. She picked up her umbrella and strolled over to the Doctor, circling him once, twice, before reaching up with her free hand to rip the duct tape off his mouth.

The Doctor's lips and face stung. He worked his jaws experimentally, then tried, "Missy --- "

She jabbed him in the chest with the tip of her umbrella. Pain stabbed between his hearts, intense enough that the Doctor had to squeeze his eyes shut and breathe carefully for several seconds before he recovered his equilibrium. She had fitted a pain inducer onto the umbrella; it was obviously calibrated for Time Lords in that it was impossible for him to ignore. That was the point of pain: you couldn't evade it and you just wanted it to stop.

It was Missy's way of holding his attention. Like the archaic torture equipment, it was theatre. The Doctor knew that if she wanted to take him apart cell by cell, she could. If she wanted to hurt him, she could cause him far more anguish than this. And she had. When they had met again for the first
time after the war, the Master had been --- extreme --- in his anger. He had laid waste to the Doctor's favorite planet, decimating the human race with a paradoxical army of their own descendants. He had tortured the Doctor and his friends through a whole year of captivity.

But however harsh the punishment, it wouldn't be satisfying until the Doctor understood why. In all that time, the Master had never let slip the true reason for his rage.

How often were they punishing each other for things the other had not yet done?

Now, at last, the Doctor had caught up to his own guilt.

"I should wrap you up with a ribbon and send you to the CIA," said Missy conversationally. "I'm sure they'd have you vaporized. Wouldn't that be fun?"

"You know that I had to --- " The Doctor began, when Missy cut him off with a stab of her umbrella to his lower back. He gasped, forcing himself not to struggle and dislocate his arms further.

"Narvin," she hissed, still standing behind him. "Trap me (jab), kill me (jab), fair enough. But you handed me over to that imbecilic worm Narvin." She held the point of the umbrella against the Doctor's spine and twisted. He went numb with agony. It was a long time before he could speak again.

"Web of time," he managed to say. "Already happened." He knew she understood. She had waited until now to say anything. And even remembering what had happened, she had sent him back along her timeline for his inevitable betrayal. In an odd way, Missy had a greater respect for the integrity of the web of time than the Doctor did. After crossing his own timeline so often and indulging in so many ontological loops, he had become cavalier.

She shut him up with a savage jolt from the umbrella. "Web of time! What did you care about the web of time when it came to saving your precious Ace? Or Charlotte Pollard? Or Clara Oswald?" She punctuated each name with another spike of pain.

"..." The Doctor struggled to piece together his thoughts. It's not like that. The Master always survived, but the Doctor's human friends were fragile. "I had a duty of care."

Missy didn't answer at first. Then, still standing behind him, she said, "They sent me into the war. I was so scared. Time falling to jagged pieces. Everything in flux. It hurt, Doctor."

"I know." The Doctor shut his eyes. He knew the pain she meant; he had felt it, too. It was the pain of having your timeline twisted out of recognition, the pain of burning in and out of existence, over and over beyond the point of insanity. It was the pain of time itself, broken and suffering without beginning or end.

Neither spoke for awhile. Then the Doctor heard a sharp hiss. The smell of burnt rope filled the air. The pressure on his arms lifted and he dropped heavily to his feet. His muscles screaming and stiff from being strung up for so long, the Doctor was unable to keep his balance and toppled over onto the floor.

Missy moved around behind him and took hold of his arms and torso, expertly manipulating his joints back into place. The Doctor bit back a cry at the spike of pain. When she was done, she walked away without another look at him, sitting down on the edge of a bed of nails. The bed of nails was the closest thing to a chair left in the room. It wasn't the kind of densely-set bed of nails used in physics demonstrations, but rather a surface sparsely populated with vicious metal teeth. Even so, the wooden rim of the bed was just wide enough to sit on without impaling yourself.
Missy sat in silence, leaning forward with her hands resting on top of her umbrella.

The Doctor stretched out cautiously, easing himself into the least painful position he could. His thoughts drifted off as he entered a healing trance. He didn't know how long it was until he woke himself again. Turning his head, he saw that Missy had not moved.

The Doctor clambered to his feet, wincing as residual aches shot through his body. He went over to the bed of nails and sat down next to Missy. "I'm sorry."

After awhile, she leaned towards him, her head resting against the Doctor's shoulder. He eased an arm around her. She said softly, "I know."

Her thoughts touched his, and he saw that she had forgiven him a long time ago. A memory welled up: her memory, his memory, shared between them. The Doctor, two lives ago, stepping without hesitation between the Master and Rassilon when the latter was about to unleash his gauntlet of death upon the former.

Everything after that had been obfuscation. It was always the two of them, together or apart, had always been, since they had been children. Yet as they grew older, the Doctor felt a bottomless chasm open between them. To reach across it was to risk a step into infinite darkness. A moment snatched here or there, that was all he dared.

He didn't feel that brave today. Not even when her touch woke in him, as it always did, a longing for closer contact, physical as well as mental intimacy. He suppressed the longing ruthlessly. It was too dangerous. Too perverse.

"Coward." Missy mocked him fondly, without rancor. "Is that why you love your human pets so much? Because they're safer?"

It's not that. I don't, thought the Doctor. Not with them. Celibacy was the default for most Time Lords, most of the time.

And is that what you aspire to? Missy let the question rattle through his mind. Why do you travel with humans, then?

Do you remember when our world was new and full of hope? When the future held all our dreams? The Doctor's thoughts bled into Missy's mind. He felt too weary to speak aloud. Sometimes, through human eyes, I can see that again. The universe awash with wonder.

"And then we learned what horrors this wonderful universe contained, Doctor," said Missy. And prophecy turned the future into another monster to dread.

Another memory surfaced. His own voice, justifying his interference in that universe.

_There are some corners of the universe which have bred the most terrible things..._

The Doctor echoed his own long-ago words, whispering, "They must be fought."

"They must be mastered," countered Missy.

And from that, everything else inevitably followed. Until they arrived at this point where they were unable to do anything other than hurt each other. The Doctor grasped in vain for their lost innocence, thinking, what have we done to ourselves?

"We won, Doctor," said Missy. "Look at you. Enough power to change whatever you want.
Remake the universe itself. But you can't throw it away fast enough. Didn't we prove that, that day in the graveyard?"

The Doctor flinched at the truth of her words. And her? She had the power to dominate any world she liked. Rule the Earth, rule the galaxy. Then what?

I wait for your opposition, came Missy's reply. Isn't that always the best part?

And how many people do we kill along the way? thought the Doctor. How many dead already? How many more before we're done?

What's gone is gone. We're not killing anyone now. Do you understand "now"? We can be enemies yesterday and enemies tomorrow, but "now" is its own moment. Missy's umbrella clattered to the floor as she wrapped both of her hands around the Doctor's head and turned him to face her. For a moment, their eyes met. Then she pulled him close and drew him into a kiss. This is what now tastes like.

He could drown in now.

Now was the moment in which he held his old friend again. They could be those innocent youths again.

She pulled away abruptly. Her thoughts were sharp-edged inside his skull. We can't. We're not.

Come back. Don't stop, he begged, reaching out for her. He needed her more than he could say. Another moment, and this now would be lost forever.

Missy twisted free. I don't make love to ghosts.

"I'm not a ghost. I'm an idiot." He let his hands drop to his sides and he slumped off the edge of the bed of nails until he was sitting on the floor. A lonely, lust-crazed idiot.

"All right, then, Doctor Idiot. But I have to tell you, self-pity isn't your most attractive attribute." She turned to face him again, smiling slightly. A genuine smile, not the one she used to deceive or to intimidate.

It wasn't beautiful and perfect. The floor was uncomfortable. The lighting in the ancillary power station was too harshly bright. The Doctor's tortured limbs still hurt. Their clothes had too many fasteners and snagged annoyingly.

Even so. It was the now that belonged to both of them.

And that was enough.

There was a moment, afterwards, while he disentangled himself from her (both physically and mentally) that he froze at the sight of her face. Because she looked so peaceful. Content. And the Doctor couldn't help but remember the version of her he had met in the other universe, where she had been Hades. He wondered about the Master's relationships there, the wife he had mentioned, and the others. Had his lovers seen him like this and thought they were safe?

Missy saw the change in his expression. "What?"

The Doctor shook his head. He retrieved his clothes and began pulling them back on.

Missy's clothes were more complicated. "Here, help me with this," she ordered.
"Isn't this taking authenticity too far?" The Doctor complained as he fumbled with Missy's Victorian corset, which had to be laced up the back. "How did you get it on in the first place?"

"It's possible to do it alone. Just tedious and difficult," said Missy.

"Speaking of difficult," muttered the Doctor. "Your daughter. Would you really have killed her?"

"How many people have I killed, Doctor? Do you need to ask?"

The Doctor sighed and turned away, letting her finish dressing herself. He busied himself on the other side of the room. "So, this magic music box of yours. I take it you were experimenting with the other universe's equivalent of anti-time."

"Something like that," said Missy. She pulled the last remaining pins out of her hair, shook it out, then used a brush she had found somewhere to straighten the resulting tangle. "More of a devouring darkness. They called it the 'Nyx'."

"Goddess of night?"

"Went with the Greek theme. If I had still been doing Norse, it would probably have ended up as Fenris."

The Doctor grimaced. "Not a name I'd pick."

"What, because of old Time Lord legends?" Missy came over beside him, checked the readings on the music box.

"Not just a legend," said the Doctor. "I met Fenric before. Didn't like him."

"What does it matter, so long as you beat him? Which I'm sure you did." Missy adjusted a setting.

"And you can do the same to these Neverpeople. With the power boosted and the parameters tuned to this universe, this music box can trap any anti-time creature inside and hold it securely. You just have to aim it accurately."

"First we have to get close enough. How were you planning to find the Neverpeople?"

"I thought you had the plan. How did you track down the anti-time before?"

"My TARDIS had a link to Clara's TARDIS. That's not going to help us now."

"I'm sure we'll think of something."

Two days later (relative time), they still hadn't thought of anything. The TARDIS scanners simply didn't have the range. They took random samples, but it was worse than trying to find one drop of water in the ocean. The Doctor had been ridiculously lucky often enough in his life before, but not this time.

"All of space and time. They could be anywhere," said the Doctor.

"You could de-synchronize our timestreams. Then just look for the area of disruption," suggested Missy.

"No," said the Doctor, as he had said when she suggested the same thing before. "We can't risk that much damage..."
"...to the web of time," finished Missy. "I know, I know."

"I've already lost one planet," said the Doctor grimly. "I won't let that happen again."

"If we knew what they wanted, we could make an educated guess as to their location," said Missy. "You spoke to one of them, Doctor. What did he say?"

The Doctor shrugged. "Nothing much. He was probably a Time Lord once. Wanted to steal my life. The usual. I remember the last lot of Neverpeople wanted to invade Gallifrey."

"We've checked Gallifrey already," Missy pointed out. "Nothing."

"If not Gallifrey, then where?" The Doctor let the question hang in the air.

The Doctor and Missy stared at each other. The answer occurred to both of them simultaneously. "Skaro?"
Skaro was the home planet of the Daleks, a race of genocidal mutants encased in deadly tanks. It was also the home of the Thals, but they had found co-existence with the Daleks impossible. The Daleks spent centuries fighting the Thals before moving on to the rest of the universe. Skaro had been destroyed by the Doctor at least once, but the Daleks always rebuilt it.

It was the last place anyone sane would want to visit.

The Doctor stared at its image in the scanner and hoped their guess had been wrong.

Missy draped an arm around his shoulders. "Don't look so glum, dear. It's practically our holiday cottage."

The Doctor snorted. "I didn't enjoy it much last time. I found it rather a draining experience."

"But exciting," Missy purred in his ear.

Not something he wanted to admit. He shook her off and said in exasperation, "Oh, don't start." He hadn't forgotten that she had tried to trick him into shooting Clara.

"You're not still holding that against me? Some people. No sense of humor," grumbled Missy. "Anyway, you left me on Skaro, so I'd call it even."

The Doctor shook his head, making an effort to tighten his mental shields. He moved away, distracting himself with the TARDIS controls. "The obvious thing to do would be to prevent the creation of the Daleks. That's what they sent me to do, but I..."

"You lost your nerve, I know," said Missy. "You and your moral qualms."

"Yes, but the point is, someone else may want a go at it."

Missy shook her head. "Not since the Time War. That particular cat's already been skinned down to bare bone. The Daleks and the Time Lords were woven together in the Cruciform. There's no unraveling that without ripping time apart."

The Doctor knew little of the Cruciform, except that it had been captured by the Daleks and destroyed in its first use. As far as the Doctor understood, it had been meant to protect Gallifrey's timeline, but instead it had created a stalemate: neither Time Lords nor Daleks could erase the other from history without also erasing themselves. In order to break that stalemate...

"Rassilon's 'Final Sanction'," muttered the Doctor. "I know. But if it's Neverpeople, they may not care. Daleks, Time Lords, they'll happily consign both to oblivion."

"Teensy bit worrying," conceded Missy.

"Well, there's nothing here," said the Doctor. "But I didn't expect to find anything post-war. We'll have to try further upstream."
"Upstream" would take them into the war zone. The Daleks were stronger then, making it more difficult to fly the TARDIS through undetected. The Doctor didn't plan to linger in the war, but he would have to cross it in order to reach old Skaro, the Skaro on the other side of the time lock.

Once upon a time on Old Skaro...

After Hakkendar the Undefeated proved his title by running out of Thal tribes to conquer, he spent three days in seclusion in the holiest site in the Thal lands: the Temple of the Mantis. Under the guidance of the priests, Hakkendar fasted and sat in meditation.

When he returned from the temple, he returned with a new vision, a vision he determined to share with his people. Soldiers and warlords from the thirty kingdoms of the Thal gathered at the temple amphitheatre, while Hakkendar took center stage on the spot normally reserved for the High Mantis. No one disputed his right to take on the prophet's mantle in addition to all the positions of power he already held. Such was his reputation in those days, a reputation born out of military genius and sheer charisma.

His people did him honor with a display of flags, each emblazoned with Hakkendar's red-and-gold solar lion symbol, now the emblem of Thal Unity. Drums and trumpets saluted his entrance with a fanfare. The crowd stood, stomping their feet and cheering their conqueror.

"My beloved people!" Hakkendar's voice carried to the highest tier without need for amplification. The Amphitheatre of the Mantis was an acoustic miracle. A bowl carved out of a mountainside, the amphitheatre had forty-nine curving rows of seats, rising steeply up the slope in tiers. Stone seats captured the sound and channeled it to every person in the audience of over ten thousand.

Hakkendar raised his arms in acknowledgement of his supporters, waiting for the noise to die down before continuing his speech.

"Too long have the Kaleds taken advantage of our disunity and spread their empire at the expense of our race. They build walls and restrict our travel. They multiply ever faster, spreading over all the land and filling it with their degenerate offspring. Our people have allowed this in their weakness. All our strengths we have turned against ourselves. But no more!" He continued in this vein for some time, soaking the crowd with the fervor of the oppressed finally given a chance to strike back. "The Thal people have endured the crucible of war and emerged stronger than ever before."

The crowd listened, enraptured. The line of standard-bearers standing behind Hakkendar never wavered. The conqueror's words rolled on, inexorable, suffusing the audience with the thrill of being, at last, on the winning side.

"Now we, the Thal people, finally stand united. Have I not proven through victory after victory that I am your supreme leader by wisdom and by might? The gods stand at my shoulder, but true power lies with you, my beloved people! The time has come to grasp that power. Who will join with me? Who hears the call of war? Who will follow the Flag of Unity, the Flag of Conquest?"

The crowd roared its approval. "Hakkendar! Hakkendar! HAKKENDAR!"

The banners of Thal Unity fluttered in the wind. The band struck up the old battle song that had become the anthem of Hakkendar's army. Raggedly at first, then with increasing unity and power, the crowd took up the song. Ten thousand voices sang together.

Sang of the numberless battles that filled the road ahead...
With Missy's help, the TARDIS reached the past with a minimum of fuss. After that, it was a matter of drifting backwards through the time vortex, scanning for traces of anti-time.

"If we're lucky, they'll be here and not in the height of the Time War." The Doctor set the controls. "Navigation is bad enough anywhere near Skaro. The timelines are scarred from all the previous attempts to erase the planet from history."

"Well, it was never going to win any popularity contests," said Missy. She peered at the scanners. "Nothing here, either."

They continued back down Skaro's timeline, past the creation of the Daleks, through the Thousand Year War. About two years before the war began in earnest, the anti-time readings spiked.

"Ah," said the Doctor. "Get them before the Kaled-Thal war starts. Someone's been taking lessons from Mortimus." Mortimus was another meddling Time Lord, with idiosyncratic ideas about "improving" history and a penchant for disguising himself as a monk. The Doctor had run into him a few times before. It never ended pleasantly. "God, I hope he's not involved this time. He can't be a Neverperson, since I remember who he is."

"I wish I didn't," said Missy. "I had to collaborate with him a few times during the war. But don't worry. He won't be bothering us."

The Doctor regarded her suspiciously. "What did you do to him?"

Missy smirked. "Left him counting grains of sand at the Monastery of the Ineluctable Modality of the Tangible."

"Good luck to him, then," said the Doctor, not meaning it. He set the coordinates for a spot near one of the concentrations of anti-time. It was one of a dozen such concentrations that they located, dispersed over a wide swathe of the main land mass. "Here we are."

Before they materialized, Missy changed back into her zybanium/zero-matter armor, complete with anti-time weapons.

The Doctor refused her offer of one of the staser rifles. He carried the souped-up music box under his left arm. "What is that --- " he waved his right hand vaguely, indicating her whole outfit --- "thing you're wearing, anyway?" He guessed at a Gallifreyan origin, as the surcoat had a Seal of Rassilon design printed on the back.

"It's the official uniform of the Knights of Rassilon," explained Missy. "The order is defunct nowadays. This was the best anti-time armor they had in the CIA vaults."

The Doctor blinked. "Knights of Rassilon? Rassilon had an order of knights? When? Why?"

"More like his personal squad of assassins, but 'knight' sounded prettier. He used them during the war for targets even the CIA wouldn't touch. Never mind if they opened a breach in the web of time." Missy tapped her chest. "They were protected by their armor against any anti-time that might leak through. It's based on the same technology as the Sash of Rassilon."

"I assume they had something for sealing up the temporal breaches, too," said the Doctor. He didn't remember anything about the Knights of Rassilon, but then again, he hadn't spent much time on Gallifrey during the war. He had only dealt with the military and a few members of the High Council. Missy, working for the CIA, would have been privy to the shadier aspects of Gallifreyan power. "Since time is still intact, more or less."

"Glue?"

"Trust me, you don't want to know how it's manufactured. And I only have a limited supply, so we'll both be happier if you... do whatever it was you were doing before."

The Doctor wanted to ask more, but Missy snapped her visor shut, ending the conversation. She rotated the Doctor around and pushed him firmly towards the door. "Come on, Doctor, let's go save the universe."

"It's... surprisingly rural." The Doctor surveyed the landscape, seeing a patchwork of fields, meadows, and woods. Smoke rose from the clusters of houses scattered about. The sun was just beginning to rise above the horizon, burning away the morning mist. Farmers were already at work in the fields. Even though they obviously still relied on animal power, the Doctor knew from the TARDIS scans that they had steam engines, a railroad network, and more industrialization near their urban centers. Even so, this was the greenest and most tranquil version of Skaro the Doctor had ever seen.

"Pre-space age, very dull," said Missy, sounding unimpressed. "Happy farmers, noble warriors, und so weiter."

The Doctor shaded his eyes with a hand and peered into the distance. "I can see walls and towers. We must be near the border. It doesn't look too heavily guarded. They fear war, but they're used to peace. The next generation will change all that."

"I can't wait," said Missy. "At least it'll make things more interesting. There's nothing like a war to ratchet up the technology levels in a hurry." She held up her device and took a reading. "This way."

The Doctor didn't want to cut across the fields, so after getting a triangulation on their target, they followed the existing roads as best they could. Their path took them to a village next to a small river. Animals resembling chickens, ducks, dogs, and goats roamed freely. People did their laundry by hand on the river bank, and the smell of cooking oil mingled with that of smoke in the air.

No one paid them any attention. The Doctor's appearance was not too far off the local custom, but Missy's was glaringly outlandish. Then he realized. "Perception filter?"

Missy nodded. "Woven into the surcoat." It kept most people from noticing her unless they already knew her, or if she spoke or did anything else to attract attention. The effect extended far enough around her to partially cover the Doctor as well.

The Doctor glanced around. He felt a twitchiness at the ends of his fingers which told him that they were close. "There's a trace of anti-time in the breeze." It settled into his skin.

The trace grew stronger, leading them down a dirt path and ending at a single-story cottage. A fence enclosed a vegetable garden in the front yard, while fruit trees could be seen around the sides. A circular symbol was scrawled on the front door in red paint, a notice nailed underneath it. All the windows were boarded shut.

The Doctor frowned at the notice. "Looks like this place has been designated a 'plague house'." He knocked on the door.

No response.
He knocked again. "Hello? Anyone home?"

No response.

"Hey!" A man's voice shouted at them from the path. "Hey, you! Get out of there!"

The Doctor swung around, reflexively grabbing Missy's wrist before she disintegrated the stranger for his rudeness. He pulled her with him to go talk to the new arrival.

"Who are you? Are you Thals?" the man burst out, before the Doctor even opened his mouth to speak. "We don't need your kind sniffing around here, bringing in who knows what diseases and all."

"We're not Thals," said the Doctor. "I'm the Doctor."

"Oh. Oh," repeated the man, backing away. "Alright, then. Better you than me. Just in from the city, are you?"

"Something like that," said the Doctor.

The man cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Right. I'll just leave you to it, shall I?" He backed away a few more steps, then turned and hurried away out of sight.

The Doctor released his hold on Missy's wrist and sighed. "Friendly neighborhood, eh?"

Missy laughed. "They didn't shoot you or arrest you, so I'd call that friendly, yes."

The Doctor tried the front door again, again with no response. "Hmm." He started off around the side of the house, hoping the back door would be more hospitable.

Missy trailed after him. She plucked a fruit in passing from a tree, tipping up her visor to take a bite, only to spit it out and toss the rest a moment later. "Needs a good few months to ripen. I wonder if you could use anti-time to accelerate the process?"

"Anti-time is not an agricultural supplement!" said the Doctor. "And don't even think about using it to create an army of sentient fruit trees or whatever insane notion you have in your head..."

"Maybe later," said Missy. "Look, there's the back door. It's not boarded up. Probably not even locked."

It wasn't. It opened to a gentle push of the hand. The Doctor peered inside to see a kitchen. There was a fireplace with an oven built into it, but nothing burned on the hearth except a heap of embers. Again, the technology was primitive, although the Doctor guessed they had indoor plumbing and more sophisticated stoves elsewhere on Skaro. The anti-time traces were even stronger inside, though no source was visible.

"Anyone home?" the Doctor called out. He took a step across the threshold.

A moment later, a door creaked from somewhere beyond the kitchen. Then the sound of footsteps, and then a young woman's voice. "Supplies were delivered yesterday. If you're another one of those busybodies come to shout at us, then just go away, please! I'm sure you mean well, and we're very grateful, but..."

At this point, the speaker emerged from the back hallway and stopped abruptly, gaping at the Doctor. "Who the heck are you?"
"I'm the Doctor."

"What? Not another one," the young woman said, shooing him away with a determined wave of her hands. She was short and sturdy-looking, plainly dressed, with sandy brown hair pulled back in a braid. "Tell the elders we don't need a doctor. My brother's not sick. He's touched by holiness."

"I've never met the elders, unless that chap outside was one. But I think we need to take a look at your brother, anyway," said the Doctor. Specks of anti-time clung to the sister. She had clearly been in contact with someone infected with it. "May we come in?"

"'We'?"

The Doctor glanced back and nodded at Missy, who pushed her way through the door to stand next to him. He started to introduce her, when he heard a loud thump. He turned, startled to see that the woman had fallen to her knees with her hands raised in a gesture of supplication.

Her eyes were wide with awe. "The Archangel of Eternity!"

Chapter End Notes

If any of this clashes with official Skarosian history, just blame the Time War for any differences!
"They [Thals] were the warriors then." --- The Doctor (The Daleks)

The sister's name was Elana; her brother was Matthies.

The Doctor coaxed the names out of her while trying to disabuse her of the notion of Missy being any kind of supernatural being. He shuddered to think what mischief Missy might accomplish with a free minion or three. "Look, she really isn't. Missy, take off your helmet. Show her."

"Oh, very well." Missy lifted the helmet off her head briefly before settling it back into place. "See? Not an Archangel."

Elana climbed slowly to her feet, staring at Missy. "You're a woman?"

"Not an Archangel. Are we clear on that?" snapped the Doctor. "So you've met someone dressed like this before. The question is, who? And where? And why did you think they were an Archangel of whatever?"

"Oh, I could tell right away, from his voice," explained Elana earnestly. "It was uncanny. Like a god speaking into your heart. It made me feel all tingly inside."

"What, like this?" The Doctor concentrated the anti-time particles he had collected on his way here into his right hand. He shaped it into a net and flung it over Elana's head, then dragged it back, taking with it the specks of anti-time that infected her. It was disturbingly easy. He had, without really noticing it, acquired too much practice with manipulating anti-time. He let a trace of it seep into his voice, "You have to be careful who you let into your heart. They might leave dirty footprints."

Elana paled. She whispered, "Are you testing my faith? You are angels!"

"No, no, no, no, no." The Doctor took a deep breath. He couldn't afford to let the anti-time distort his thinking. He sensed Missy standing off to the side, radiating smug amusement. "Never mind. Tell us about this 'Archangel'."

"The Archangel of Eternity and the Oracle of the Unwritten did come to Hakkendar the Undefeated on the third night of his vigil and did grant him revelation, lo, unto the thousand thousandth generation," said Elana, in the tones of someone quoting holy scripture. "And then did Hakkendar the First Disciple speak to his people, teaching of the path they must follow."

"Hakkendar? Hakkendar, Hakkendar...ah. But Hakkendar was, is, a Thal," said the Doctor. Skarosian history was not one of his stronger subjects, but he did remember the name.

"What's a nice Kaled girl doing getting involved with Thal religion?" wondered Missy aloud.

Elana stammered defensively, "'N-no, it's not like that. I'm not a traitor or anything. Thals aren't the barbarians people think they are. They're wise, and strong, and honorable. They have faith in the gods. They're more attuned to natural cycles than we are. People only call them savages because they don't understand."

"And you do understand them? How? Let me guess, close personal experience?" asked Missy. She seated herself on the kitchen table, letting her legs dangle over the edge. She picked up a paring knife and scratched idly at the wooden surface.

Elana blushed and looked at her feet.
"Oh, wonderful," groaned the Doctor, smacking his forehead. "What do we have here, Romeo and Juliet in Old Skaro?"

"What?" Elana glanced up in confusion. "I don't know what you mean."

"I mean, do you have some particular Thal you're especially close to? Boyfriend? Girlfriend?" The Doctor had his doubts for their long-term prospects, given the subconscious racism underlying her words even when consciously defending the Thals. And the Thousand-Year War loomed ahead, casting its shadow over any cross-racial relationship.

"Husband," admitted Elana. "Raffosis. He's one of Lord Hakkendar's soldiers. We just got married two weeks ago, across the border. I didn't tell anyone, but my brother found out anyway and showed up at the wedding to drag me home. It was awful. He said such horrible things!"

"Then what?" prompted the Doctor.

"I thought they'd kill Matthies, but then Raff said it was bad luck to fight at a wedding, so he prayed for help. He was there when Lord Hakkendar shared the Blessing of the Unwritten, you know, so he had the right to call upon the Archangel."

"And the Archangel came? Remarkably responsive. Most deities can't be bothered to show up," said the Doctor.

"He said we were to be the first of many such marriages, but because we were first, he would give us a special blessing," Elana recounted, sounding awed by her good fortune. "He chose Matthies to join the ranks of the angels. But since the transformation would take time, he told me to take my brother home and wait. Afterwards, Raff and I could reunite at the peace conference."

"What peace conference?"

"You know, the one in the capital next week. Lord Hakkendar is meeting the Kaled government to make a new treaty, one that isn't unfair to the Thals. Raff will be there, as part of Lord Hakkendar's staff."

"Right, a whole week away. Your brother, on the other hand..." The Doctor glanced at Missy. "'Transformation', how sinister does that sound?"

Missy slid off the edge of the table, leaving the paring knife stuck upright with its point buried in the wooden surface. "Come on, Doctor, time for a house call."

"Take us to your brother," said the Doctor.

"He's been in the cellar since we came back," said Elana. "He said the light disturbed him." She led them into a short hallway that connected the rooms of the cottage. "I think he's been having visions."

The Doctor lagged behind, poking his head into each room. "So who's the artist?" He nodded at the front room with its easels and stacks of canvases propped up against the walls.

"Matthies is a painter," explained Elana. "We moved here from the city a couple of years ago. Border scenes and 'wild Thal' portraits are all the rage in art galleries now. At least that's what people say."

"That's how you met Raffosis?"

Elana nodded. "I used to go with my brother, arranging supplies and setting up sittings and so on."
She picked up a glass-sheathed oil lamp and lit it. "This way..." She pushed a door open, but hesitated at the entrance. She lowered her voice to say, "He's down there."

The Doctor looked sharply at her. "What's wrong? Are you...? You are. You're frightened. Of your brother?"

Elana shook her head quickly. "N-no. It's just that he's been working on a painting. But how can he paint with no light?"

"Let's find out," said the Doctor, taking the lamp from Elana with his free hand. He pushed past her and started down the stairs. A wave of anti-time washed over him, bespeaking nothing good. But the Doctor was determined to salvage what he could. "Matthies? We're here to help."

"Help? I don't need help." The voice was resonant with the eerie buzz of anti-time, and the Doctor knew he was too late. It was not a Kaled he was dealing with, but a Neverperson. "I've finished the painting. Do you want to see?"

The Doctor reached the bottom of the stairs and held up the lamp. A man stood with his face to the wall. A dirty strip of cloth was tied around his head. His right hand rested on top of a rectangular waist-high canvas. It, too, was turned towards the wall. The Doctor could sense the gaping wound centered in his skull, from which anti-time bled, drop by corrupting drop.

"Yes. I want to see." Unable to resist his curiosity, the Doctor moved forward. He could sense Missy behind him, her anti-time staser drawn and ready. "Who are you? You're a Neverperson, but you can't be Matthies. Matthies is remembered, Matthies existed."

"I am Matthies." He turned, then, both himself and his painting. The cloth around his head covered his eyes. It was soaked through with blood, old and new. "I was Matthies, but now I am more. Behold my vision." He gestured towards the canvas.

The Doctor's gaze followed the motion, focusing on the painting. The chaotic blur of crude slashes and swirls suddenly resolved themselves in his mind into an image. Shocked, he nearly dropped the lamp. "The Gates of Elysium!"

It was impossible. How could Matthies depict a scene millenia in the future in a distant star system, when his people hadn't even developed space travel yet? But the impossible stared the Doctor in the face, a brutal image that bored into his memories. The Nightmare Child at the Gates of Elysium.

The Doctor swayed on his feet, caught in the vision, all else forgotten. The music box slipped unnoticed from his grasp and clattered to the floor. Anti-time infused the painting, transforming it into far more than mere pigments on a piece of canvas. The wall between now and then weakened. He could hear the distant explosions of a raging battle, smell the smoke and the reek of death and broken time. He was there, once, twice...

Then a flare of light broke through his daze. Another, and another. Matthies staggered back, limbs flailing as his body spasmed. The painting fell over, face down, releasing the Doctor from his horrified trance.

"Get on with it, Doctor." Missy's voice shook him into action.

The Doctor set down the lamp and hurried forward to Matthies. He reached for the artist's timeline to seal the breach. But instead of bending to his will, the timeline shattered.

"It's been corrupted," he said. "Anti-time splicing itself in from the beginning. Creating a... hybrid. Damn it. A Neverperson with a name that shouldn't exist anymore, but it does, making it an anchor
"for a reality that is wrong, whereas the vision is made false. What's real is false, what's false is real."

The Doctor reached instead for his own timeline and used that to seal the breach.

"It's not that easy," snarled Matthies. The shattered segments of his timeline drew back together, fused with the anti-time that still flooded the cellar.

"Yes, it is," said Missy, shooting him again.

The Doctor scrabbled across the floor for the modified music box. He groped for the hand crank to activate its power, but his fingers slipped away, unable to grasp the handle. He tried again, with the same result. Then he realized. "Of course. It repels anti-time. And I'm too contaminated."

Missy took the box from him. "If you want something done..." She began turning the crank.

It wasn't sound that emanated from the music box.

Instead, the mechanism inside the box induced vibrations in time, vibrations that could be manipulated to control the flow of anti-time.

Matthies screamed. Anti-time poured out from his mouth and nostrils, drawn inexorably into the music box. The husk that was left behind collapsed, its reality drained away.

The Doctor didn't scream, but he came close. He felt himself being dragged along with the current of anti-time. He could only cling to whatever shreds of reality he could grasp with his mind. It was like being rolled helplessly on the beach as the waves crashed over him, pulling everything back out to sea in the undertow.

Then it was over, and the Doctor was left lying on his back, feeling flayed and empty, as if the marrow had been hollowed out from his bones. Eyes closed, he concentrated on breathing and convincing himself that he still existed.

Feeling a sudden change in pressure, he opened his eyes to find that Missy had placed the music box on his chest. He reached for it with a hand and was pleased to find that he was able to touch the box again.

"You're useless, you know that? I'm amazed you managed to survive this long," said Missy. She reached down and offered him a hand up.

He accepted it gratefully. His knees still felt uncertain. "I know, and I love you, too."

"Hmph," snorted Missy. She dropped his hand and went over to examine the painting. "Ugly thing, isn't it? What should we do with it?"

"Burn it," said the Doctor flatly. He wasn't about to blind himself like the painter had, but he didn't want to see that vision again, either.

Missy obliged with a wave of her handheld device. It was more disintegration than open flames, but close enough. "So much for constructive criticism."

"Let's go," said the Doctor. He gave the cellar a final glance. There was nothing left of Matthies except a forlorn smudge on the floor.

They met Elana at the top of the stairs. From the bewildered expression on her face, she was trying to rationalize their presence. "Oh. You're... the exterminators?"
The Doctor nodded. He could see no traces of Matthies left in her thoughts. Her brother had never existed. "Yes. The... ah... the fumigation is complete."

Reality would mend itself, time papering over the scars. Only the Doctor and Missy, as time sensitives who had been present at the point of erasure, remembered that there could ever have been a Kaled named Matthies.

"So our Neverperson was one of the Knights of Rassilon," said the Doctor, once they were back in the TARDIS. "But why dispersed? Did the CIA re-institute use of the Oubliette of Eternity?"

Missy shook her head. "Not the CIA, or I would have known. Rassilon is likelier as a culprit. There were rumors going around that he had an Oubliette built into his gauntlet."

"But why would he disperse one of his own knights?"

Missy shrugged. "You know Rassilon. Maybe one of the knights dared to express an original thought. Then, poof!"

"Well, we can ask them when we catch up." The Doctor set the coordinates.


"There wasn't a peace conference. The Thousand Year War broke out with no attempt at negotiations," the Doctor reminded her. They weren't actually disrupting anything yet. Security was tight (for a nation unused to violence) around Klade House, the Kaled prime minister's official residence where the conference was being held. The Doctor and Missy were observing Klade House from the roof of a hotel two blocks away. It was the highest building in the area. Missy had hypnotized the Kaled guards stationed there into ignoring the intrusion, as they had been alert enough to overcome a perception filter.

Missy checked the readings on her device. "Traces of anti-time inside that building, but no Neverpeople going in or out so far. We'll have to go in after them."

The Doctor winced, imagining the carnage that would ensue. "No, let's not. We can draw them outside."

"How?" Missy idly aimed her device downwards. "I could shoot one or two of them from here. See if the ants don't come scurrying out of the nest."

The Doctor slapped her hand down. "No!"

"You're no fun."

"That's what you always say, yet here you are." He glanced over the edge of the roof to make sure no one had been shot. His gaze froze when he spotted a familiar figure approaching Klade House. "Hush. I have an idea. Come on."

"Look at that, it's our pair of lovebirds," said Missy as they left the hotel entrance. It was indeed Elana, standing outside Klade House, talking to a Thal soldier. "Elana and... Raffosis, was it?"

"Let's see where they're going." The Doctor and Missy followed Elana and Raffosis as the couple set
off down the street, hand in hand.

"How sweet," said Missy, when their destination turned out to be a public garden a few blocks away.

The Doctor eyed the rows of flowers and shrubbery in distaste. "I hate gardens."

Missy took the Doctor by the arm and dragged him under the gate. "Gardens are lovely. Especially if there's a decent fountain or two."

"This place. Too rectilinear," the Doctor complained. Even the fountains were primly contained in right-angled pools of water.

"Never mind the geometry," said Missy. She dropped the Doctor's arm and started edging forward. "There they are."

Elana and Raffosis had stopped under the shade of a wooden arbor. The structure formed a tunnel of sorts, enclosing a path paved with bricks. Vines grew across the lattice, clusters of green fruit hanging over the walkway. It was deep inside an obscure corner of the garden, giving the pair a semblance of privacy.

Which the Doctor and Missy now interrupted.

The Doctor didn't approach yet, mindful of the music box under his left arm. He could sense the anti-time infesting Raffosis, and didn't want to inadvertently soak it up before he could use the box on the Neverperson he hoped Raffosis would summon. As to how to convince him...

Before the Doctor could say anything, Missy had already closed the distance between them and wrenched Elana away, dragging her a few steps down the walkway. Missy held her securely with an arm around her neck. "Pay attention, soldier boy, or I'll snap her neck."

The Doctor froze, hardly daring to breathe. "Missy..." he mouthed voicelessly.

Raffosis reached, hardly daring to breathe. "Missy..." he mouthed voicelessly.

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The Doctor froze, hardly daring to breathe. "Missy..." he mouthed voicelessly.

"Don't try anything stupid," Missy warned.

"What do you want, you...you demon?" demanded Raffosis, wide-eyed and obviously shaken by her appearance.

The Doctor bit his lip, swallowing his arguments. Better to let this play out than to interrupt and end up getting more people killed. He stood off to the side, trying to keep out of Raffosis's line of sight.

"We hear the Archangel takes your calls," said Missy. "So tell him to get his arse out here."

"Blasphemer!" The Thal's hands bunched into fists, but he kept them at his side, his eyes fixed on his wife's terrified face. "The Archangel of Eternity will strike you down."

"Tell him to strike away," said Missy. "I'm waiting."

Raffosis dropped to his knees, closing his eyes and praying aloud, "Archangel, hear my plea. A demon dares blaspheme your name. Please...she has my wife..." His voice trailed off uncertainly at the end. Then he opened his eyes and scrambled to his feet. An unnatural light glowed in his eyes. "He hears me!"

The Doctor set the music box on the ground and crouched next to it, not trusting his own stability
once anti-time became active. He rested his right hand on the handle, preparing to turn it as soon as a Neverperson showed up. This time, he planned to trap the Neverperson first, then seal the breach afterwards.

The first part of his plan went off without a hitch.

The air shimmered. A Neverperson in the garb of a Knight of Rassilon materialized in front of Missy.

Before the Neverperson could do anything, the emanations from the music box seized him, binding the anti-time that defined him. The Neverperson was trapped inside the box, leaving behind a decaying husk that slowly oozed anti-time from the hole in reality at its heart.

"The Archangel!" wailed Raffosis. Then he collapsed as the anti-time was ripped out of his body as well. He was not as far gone as Mattheis, but the same hybridization process was active in him.

The Doctor gasped and huddled over the box. The effect for him was not as severe as it had been with Mattheis, but the Doctor was still contaminated with enough anti-time to make the process of using the music box incredibly unsettling for him. He scooped up the box with trembling hands. Now for the breach. He wondered if Missy's "glue" was really worse than him mutilating his own timeline to patch up reality. He glanced up to ask her.

Only to see another Neverperson standing right behind Missy. This one was not wearing armor. She looked familiar --- it was Ashildr. No. Just like Mattheis, she had been eaten away by anti-time, her place in reality taken over by a Neverperson. The Doctor guessed that she was probably the Oracle of the Unwritten mentioned earlier by Elana.

"Behind you!" he shouted, but his warning came too late.

Missy's armor split apart, then split again. It fell to the ground in a thousand slivers of metal. Missy stumbled forward, losing her grip on her hostage.

Out of the corner of his eye, the Doctor saw Elana run to cradle her fallen husband, but the Doctor had no attention to spare for them. He fumbled with the music box, turning the crank. It didn't immediately activate, needing about half a minute to reset after each use. He muttered under his breath, "Come on, come on..."

"Impossible, that armor was designed by Rassilon. How could..." Missy managed to say even as she twisted around to face her assailant, a staser already in her hand.

The Neverperson slashed through the staser with a swipe of a long-bladed knife. "Fast-removal protocol. I have the code."

"You... how?" Even as she spoke, Missy had dodged back another step and had her second staser out, firing three shots in rapid succession.

The Neverperson wasn't there. She was behind Missy again. Slash. The second staser was sliced in half. "It was my armor," said the Neverperson. Then her hand moved again. "Snicker-snack."

Missy was down, on her knees, clutching at her chest. Anti-time gushed from the wound between her hearts, spreading like a web to every extremity.

And finally, finally, the music box activated.

The Neverperson sensed it immediately. She turned to look at the Doctor. "Stop! Or do you want to
destroy her, too?" She gestured at Missy. "She's un-moored from the timeline."

The Doctor realized with horror that she was right. In this state, Missy would be dragged along with the Neverperson into the box. If she ever came out again, it would be as a Neverperson version of herself, a transformation that could never be reversed. His hand trembled in indecision on the handle. "Even so... I can't afford to leave you to spread this contamination. This has to end."

"Why? The universe will be a better place for what I've done."

"It's wrong. Anti-time doesn't belong in this reality," said the Doctor. "You'll destroy everything."

"I bring peace!" retorted the Neverperson. "This 'reality' is nothing but unending horror. Haven't we, haven't you, suffered enough?"

"You have no idea..." began the Doctor.

"I know," interrupted the Neverperson. Then the lines of her face shifted. Another visage stared pleadingly at the Doctor. Her voice changed, implored him, "Why won't you help me? Don't you remember me?"

"Who are you?" He didn't remember her. Not her face, not her voice, not her mental signature. All he had was a nagging feeling that he was missing something.

"Please, Grandfather," said the Neverperson. "You must remember me. It's me, Susan."

"Susan?" echoed the Doctor hollowly. "Who's Susan?" Then he shook his head. It didn't matter who she had been. She was the one behind this plan. Once he eliminated her, the rest of the anti-time infection, left without a controlling intelligence, would be much easier to handle. His fingers tightened on the crank of the music box.

Then he saw Missy looking at him.

Even as their eyes met, her name slipped away from his mind. Her real name, the one no one had spoken aloud in centuries. He couldn't remember. Panic gripped his hearts. In a few moments, she would be as lost as the Neverperson who had carved her loose from time.

He couldn't. He couldn't complete that severing. But if he didn't use the music box, the Doctor was weaponless against the Neverpeople. Weaponless, with nowhere to run.

Almost nowhere.

Cursing himself for a fool, the Doctor scrambled forward, reaching to grab Missy. He held her close, with the music box wedged painfully between them. He hoped its ability to resist anti-time would help preserve her reality. He closed his eyes and leaped for the one exit left to them: through the breach ripped open in Missy's timeline.

"Grandfather!"

The Doctor ignored the Neverperson's frantic cry. All his thoughts were concentrated on Missy. You exist. You exist. You exist...

He was falling.

Falling.

Falling.
The Doctor tumbled through the maelstrom of anti-time, with no TARDIS, no time station, nothing between him and an alien universe. He kept his eyes tightly shuttered. He couldn't breathe. There was no air, here in what passed for space. His senses were screaming. Nothing was real except the music box and, he hoped, Missy. But she had lost consciousness as he pulled her through the breach and unconscious she remained.

Why was he falling?

The Doctor forced himself to focus. He didn't have long before his respiratory bypass failed.

Why was he falling?

It was more than illusion. It was the subtle pull of the music box that he felt. It was being drawn to the one other foreign object that existed here in the anti-time universe. Somewhere there was a small planetoid that was the one fixed point in the chaos. It was an ancient, shipwrecked TARDIS, and if they could reach it, there was a possibility of escape.

The question was, would they be able to reach it before they died?

After gauging their acceleration and making a wild guess at the location of the planetoid, a quick calculation gave him the answer: no. Not by far.

He sent a mental apology in Missy's direction. We've had a good run, he thought, but everything ends.

To his shock and joy, Missy's thoughts hit back with a fierce rejection. Hell, no. Not now, not yet.

The Doctor tightened his grip on her, resting his forehead on hers. At least we'll die with our timelines intact. More or less.

Don't... die. Missy's mental voice weakened after her initial moment of clarity.

But we don't have anything. No ship, no space suits, no teleporters. We're in empty space, with the only escape thousands if not millions of years away, the Doctor explained in despair. He envisioned their frozen corpses, eternally adrift.

The music box, thought Missy. Use that.

The Doctor received a fleeting impression of the required adjustments before Missy's mental presence faded completely. She had entered a protective trance and the Doctor didn't dare disturb her. But it was enough.

Brilliant, he thought as he fished out his sonic screwdriver and pressed its tip against the music box. Thank you, Missy.

The music box, even though it was built out of material from an alternate universe, was based on Time Lord technology. Like a TARDIS or a confession dial, it contained its own world inside. All the Doctor had to do was to transport himself and Missy inside it. With any luck, they could put themselves into suspended animation until they reached their destination.
The Doctor laid Missy gently on the cracked stone tiles of a dusty floor in a dim and dreary chamber. It had the same diffuse, sourceless light he remembered from his trip to the Master's version of Tartarus. Whatever else one could say of the Master, he (now she) was never half-hearted about keeping within a chosen theme.

Time here had the same thick quality he recognized from that other universe. The Neverpeople they had trapped in here would have no advantage over them. The Doctor glanced up at the open archways that pierced each wall, wishing for doors to close between him and whatever else might be out there, at least until Missy was recovered.

He knelt by her head and placed his fingers on her temples, reaching for her mind and looking into her timeline. To his relief, he could sense her name again. It lurked at the back of his thoughts, accessible if he needed it. She had managed to weave herself back into the web of time. How, he wasn't sure.

I've more experience than you at being dead, came her amused thought. It takes more than a few cuts to remove me permanently from the universe. She opened her eyes, meeting his gaze. "And it helps that you're currently alive."

The Doctor rocked back on his heels in surprise. "What? Me? What does that have to do with it?"

"Idiot," she said fondly. She clambered to her feet, brushing dirt off her clothing. She glanced down sidelong at the Doctor. "Our timelines are linked."

Sardonic applause interrupted them from one of the open archways. A Neverperson, the one who called himself the Archangel of Eternity, leaned against the wall and sneered at them. "'The enmity of ages'."

The Doctor recognized the quote from a Gallifreyan prophecy from the Time War, one concerning the Doctor and the Master. It had come to nothing in the end, only confirming the Doctor's low opinion of prophecies. He leaped to his feet to face the Neverperson. Catching a glimpse of Missy's baleful glare, he hastily seized her forearm before she did something he would regret. "What do you want?"

"I wanted to see if it was true, Doctor," said the Neverperson. "If it was true that you care more for this monster, this murderer and genocide, than for your own granddaughter."

"I don't have a granddaughter," said the Doctor, turning pale even in his denial, knowing that it might not always have been true.

"He doesn't," affirmed Missy, making no effort this time to pull away from him. "It's hardly fair to blame him for not remembering someone dispersed by the Oubliette of Eternity. Forgetting is implied in the name, isn't it?"

"Your granddaughter's name is Susan, you bastard," said the Neverperson. He straightened and took a step towards the Doctor, his fists clenched at his sides.

"And you are...?" asked the Doctor.

"I am Nialliastignamble of the Dromeian Chapter," said the Neverperson.

"Niall? One of Rassilon's so-called knights, eh? Never heard of you. But of course, you were dispersed, too," said the Doctor, rambling to cover his shock. A granddaughter. A granddaughter who had apparently been one of the Knights of Rassilon. And then been dispersed. How had the Doctor allowed that to happen? Had they been estranged? He struggled to remember, but it was
useless. Out of all the ways to erase someone from history, the Oubliette of Eternity was the harshest and most irreversible.

Niall glared at the Doctor and Missy with eyes full of hatred and scorn. "Rassilon dispersed us both. But at least I was there for her. You... you abandoned her on a primitive planet without a backward glance. And now you don't even recognize her name."

Zagreus would remember, the Doctor couldn't help thinking. Anti-time, unbound by cause and effect, was able to cross freely between all potential timelines. No. He cut off that line of thought. Gone was gone. Succumbing to the temptation to redo events was what had caused this mess in the first place. "I'm sorry. I truly am. But that doesn't excuse your meddling in the history of Skaro. If she's my granddaughter, she should know better!"

"Or she's following her grandfather's example," muttered Missy.

"Not helping," growled the Doctor through gritted teeth. His fingers tightened on her arm, but she merely laughed and snuggled against his side.

Niall looked disgusted. He took a step back and loosened his fists, his fingers twitching, as if reaching for a weapon he no longer wore. "Hypocrite. How many times was time rewritten and distorted during the war?"

"The war is over!" snapped the Doctor.

Niall shook his head. "Is it over just because you've declared victory? What kind of victory is it that leaves trillions upon trillions dead and lays waste to thousands of worlds all throughout history? Reality is scarred from the Dalek abomination. My lady Susan is creating the timeline that should have been."

"Oh, an idealist," scoffed Missy. "They always cause the most damage."

"Damage? We're the ones healing the damage," said Niall.

"Really. Let's go and see, shall we?" said the Doctor. "This brave new world of yours." He dropped Missy's arm and strode off through one of the open archways at random.

"Where exactly do you think you're going?" asked Missy, following behind him.

"I don't care. Away. Oh, look, more dimly-lit corridors." The Doctor headed on past an intersection. "You could have been more imaginative in your architecture."

"It's meant to instill feelings of futility and despair," said Missy. "Not win any building-of-the-year awards."

More footsteps clattered after them, and Niall's voice called after them, "Run away! Is that your best counter-argument?"

"What's the point of arguing with some idiot who never even existed? Anyway, we have a few million years, by my estimate, before we get a chance to see what's become of the universe," said the Doctor. He added as a glum afterthought, "If there's anything left of it by then."

"You know, I think I installed a swimming pool somewhere. Well, more of a watery pit filled with deadly hydras, but we could go for a dip after we kill the hydras," suggested Missy cheerfully. "We can use Niall as bait."
Niall glowered at Missy, keeping a careful distance between them.

"What about propulsion systems? Did you happen to install any of those?" demanded the Doctor, stopping short.

Missy held out a hand to avoid running into him. "No. Why would I? This is a prison, not a spaceship."

"Why can't it be both?" complained the Doctor. "I've been on plenty of prison ships before."

Missy rolled her eyes. "Security, dear. I bet you ended up taking control of most of those prison ships and either blew them up or dropped them into a sun."

"Maybe once or twice," admitted the Doctor. "So? Can we fly this thing?"

Missy sighed. "No, this is just your basic dimensionally transcendental anti-time collection box with life support. It can also play 'Pop! goes the weasel' if you switch it to stand-by mode. But that's about it."

The Doctor began pacing manically back and forth along the corridor and waving his hands. "So? We can build our own. I think I could rig up an engine that runs on anti-time. We have plenty of that. All we need is..." He stopped again and looked at Missy. "Materials and equipment. What do you have in here?"

"Mostly rocks," answered Missy in a resigned tone. "But it doesn't matter. We have all we need: plenty of leisure. And our minds. How are you with block-transfer computation these days?"

"Ah. A bit rusty, I'm afraid." The Doctor looked sheepish. "But as you say, no hurry. And there's three of us..." He looked at Niall. "If you ever want to get out of this box, I advise you to cooperate. Missy holds the keys to this particular prison." The Doctor glanced at her, receiving a slight nod in return. Naturally, she had built in a back door for her own use. In fact, they would need that access in order to control their flight at all. "I assume you learned the basics at the Academy."

Niall nodded reluctantly. "The basics of the theory."

"Missy can give you some pointers. I mean, she can create a whole town full of sapient beings, this is nothing in comparison," said the Doctor. He couldn't help adding, "So sapient that they turned against her and tried to kill her. Even I couldn't manage a stunt like that."

"You just don't have the concentration," teased Missy. "Oh, don't give me the eyebrows. You know it's true."

"You also had computational aids. And a mathematical genius... Adric." The Doctor stumbled over the name, remembering how the boy had died. Then another thought occurred to him. "Wait, what about that Kaled painter? Matthies? Shouldn't he be about somewhere? I wonder if he's any good at mathematics."

They never did find out anything about the painter's mathematical skills.

They found Matthies shuffling down one of the endless array of dim corridors, guiding himself by touching the wall with an outstretched hand. He was a ghost of himself, less solid than Niall, with a tendency to fizz in and out of existence.

"Matthies," called the Doctor. "Matthies."
Matthies slowed, then halted. He turned, his ruined eyes still covered by the strip of dirty cloth. "Do you see? Do you see? I can't look away. It won't let me. You must see...

Missy moved past the Doctor to Matthies, putting a hand on each side of his skull. She frowned for a moment, head canted to one side as if listening. Then she freed him and stepped back. "His mind is consumed with the vision. There's nothing else. Useless." Before anyone could react, she pulled out her device and shot him.

Instead of disintegrating, he dissolved into a cloud of flickering static. Then it reformed, and the half-ghostly shape continued shuffling down the corridor, as if nothing had happened.

At the Doctor's appalled glance, Missy shrugged. "Worth a try."

"It takes a big blast of temporal energy to kill a Neverperson," said the Doctor. He started after Matthies, wanting to help. "Wait. Matthies..."

"There's nothing you can do for him," said Niall. "His mind was too weak to endure the revelation."

At this, the Doctor whirled in rage. "You. You did this to him. This, this horror is what you plan to inflict on the universe in the name of your 'better' reality?"

Niall took a step back, but his expression was unrepentant. "Matthies was exactly the type of person who fueled the Thousand Year War! People like him ultimately led to the creation of the Daleks."

"He was just an artist!"

"An artist this year, a soldier next year, and a heartless butcher the year after that. It's only fitting that he understand where that path leads. If he had any conscience at all, he would be helping to prevent that future!"

"Conscience,'" said the Doctor in disgust. "After you've destroyed his mind?"

"A mind full of hatred and potential violence. Don't pretend you've never killed a Dalek, Doctor."

"If you can't understand the difference, there's no point in arguing with you," said the Doctor. He shook his head, shoving away his anger. "We'll have to manage with just the three of us."

"I know a place," said Missy. "Come on."

It wasn't a five-star hotel, but at least Missy found them a chamber with a rug to sit on. The rug was probably an evil rug woven from the hair of damned souls or some such nonsense, thought the Doctor, but he didn't ask. It was certainly softer and warmer than sitting on the stone floor.

"This room forms a still point due to the confluence of corridors around it. We'll have less psychic interference in here," said Missy. She had them sit down and link their minds. Niall was included, after agreeing to help them in exchange for passage out of the music box.

Block-transfer computation was a method of using equations to directly affect reality. TARDISes were partially built out of immensely complex block-transfer computations. Even the three Time Lords working together couldn't construct anything on that level, but they could manage simpler forms of transport. They were able to accelerate the flight of the music box to the point where it only took them about a decade to reach their destination. The Doctor barely felt the passage of time. It took all his concentration to maintain the necessary computations.

At the end of their journey, Missy activated the codes that shunted them out of the confines of the..."
The Doctor took a few stiff steps and massaged his limbs. Although Time Lord bodies did not atrophy from inactivity the way humans did, the years of immobility still took their toll, not to mention the lack of food and drink. Block-transfer computations had sustained him, but it left him feeling weaker than normal. Anti-time had already begun to seep into his skin, threatening to corrupt his thoughts. He glanced warily at the others.

Missy, the music box tucked under her arm, moved freely through the over-sized console room where they had materialized. She took readings with her device and opened up panels to inspect the condition of the broken TARDIS.

Niall drifted haughtily to the shadowy corners of the console room, none the worse for a decade of muttered computations. Being a Neverperson, he wasn't alive in the usual sense of the word. He was a clump of sentient anti-time held together and given purpose by the person he had once been. The Doctor didn't trust that purpose, but Niall had kept his end of the bargain and earned his freedom.

"What a wreck," said Missy after completing her initial survey. "It'll take a miracle to get even one trip out of this junk heap."

"We just need to get to Gallifrey," said the Doctor. "That's the only place with the technology to fix the time distortion."

"You mean, to stop your granddaughter from destroying the web of time," corrected Missy.

The Doctor's jaw tightened. He didn't welcome the reminder. He could feel Niall's hostility even from across the console room. "I'll check the power stations. These early models sometimes turn out to be unexpectedly robust."

The Doctor set off into the interior of the planetoid-sized TARDIS. The dimensions were distorted, making for a disorientating trek through paradoxical corridors and shifting gravity fields. At last he reached the chamber housing the artificially constructed black hole that powered the time capsule. It was not the direct link to the Eye of Harmony that later TARDIS models used, but a much less powerful block-transfer computed copy.

The containment fields were unstable, causing random surges of temporal energy to manifest throughout the ship. Dangerous, noted the Doctor. It would also make the navigation even less reliable.

He found the dynamorphic power station not too far away. He was startled to find it heavily modified from its original state. He examined the monitors set up along the walls to find that they tracked time distortions in the real universe, targeting breaches in living creatures infected by anti-time. Not only that, they were linked to other controls. The Doctor traced the connections.

"The emergency doors," he said aloud. So that was what the Neverpeople used to travel into the real universe. Unlike mindless anti-time spills, the Neverpeople didn't just appear at random. They could watch areas near breaches and select specific destinations. The Doctor slipped on his sonic sunglasses and scanned the doors, hoping that he and Missy would be able to use the same route to escape the anti-time universe.

No such luck. Only creatures of pure anti-time could travel through that passage. Anything else would simply have its particles smeared across the anti-time universe. The particles might eventually aggregate again, falling as rain onto this TARDIS-planetoid, but that was not much use for the long-dead traveller.
The Doctor sighed and went back to the monitors. At least he could check on the current state of the universe. He began toggling through the switches. Then stopped, arrested by the image that appeared on the screen in front of him. Her. It was her. The Neverperson who had called him "Grandfather."

"You still don't remember her." It was Niall's voice. The Doctor didn't turn to look.

"No."

"Do you want to remember?"

_I remember her._

The Doctor shook away the thought, but it was impossible to ignore. He did want to know. He had a granddaughter. Who was she? Why was she doing this? He had to know. Not just for himself. How could he stop her if he didn't understand? He had to, for the sake of the universe.

_I remember everything._

No, insisted the Doctor to himself. He forced the anti-time infecting his mind into quiescence. Not that way. This time he did turn around. Niall was facing him, an almost conciliatory expression on his face.

"In the last days, we were colleagues. She told me everything. I can show you," offered Niall. "Who she was, what she hoped for. She... she always believed in you, did you know that? Despite everything. But of course you don't know."

"I want to know," said the Doctor. He took a step towards Niall. "Tell me."

Niall nodded. He approached the Doctor, lifted a hand, smiled unnervingly. The Doctor held his ground. Niall touched his fingers lightly to the Doctor's face. He closed his eyes and intoned, "Contact!"

And the Doctor remembered. He remembered Susan. He remembered everything.

"No!" Overwhelmed by the flood of images and emotions from a reality that no longer existed, the Doctor collapsed in shock, unable for the moment to process the contradictory knowledge. He was only dimly aware of Niall, who was taking advantage of his shock to drag his body across the room.

And then the emergency doors opened.

The room seemed to shift, and the Doctor found himself falling into the blazing channel of anti-time. The Doctor cried out, grabbing for the door frame, barely managing to hold onto this side of reality. In the distance, he heard Niall's voice, vindictive and triumphant.

"Begone, Doctor, and trouble us no more!"
"I've never had any real identity." --- Susan (The Dalek Invasion of Earth)

Chapter Summary

"As you know, Bob..." aka Susan's story, part 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_I never felt there was any time or place that I belonged to. I've never had any real identity._

Susan had once said those words to a human. She had never told her grandfather, but perhaps he understood her feelings after all. She had been furious at the Doctor for locking the doors of the ship and abandoning her, but time had cooled her anger enough to leave her wondering why. Perhaps he had been afraid of tying her timeline too closely to his own. Perhaps he hoped for her to find an identity independent of him. Or perhaps he wanted to spare her the danger and death that always accompanied him.

As a child, she had begged him to take her away from Gallifrey. He had agreed without digging too deeply into her motivations or asking how she knew he meant to leave. How much had he guessed? Susan had chosen to leave their homeworld to escape an oppressive destiny, but the loneliness of exile wore on her spirit. And then David Campbell, the human she dared confide in, had offered her somewhere to belong. The time and place were nothing she would ever have predicted: Earth in the aftermath of a Dalek invasion.

"Was it my choice?" Susan asked, years later, after she and David had shared a full life together, had even had a child, a son. She couldn't help asking the question, despite the pain it might cause him. She might never be able to ask him again. "If Grandfather had not left..."

David Campbell, his life near its end, still had enough strength to clasp his wife's hands in his own and meet her eyes clearly. "Yes. You chose to stay with me. You had already chosen and your grandfather could read that in your hearts." He kissed her hands gently. "How can you doubt it, after all this time?"

Susan turned her face away, so that he would not see her crying. "Time... is this all the time we have?" Her voice caught in her throat. "It seems so short, too short."

"It's all right, love," said David. His eyes closed. His hands loosened, his fingers slipping away. His voice grew lower, exhausted even from this brief interlude of lucidity. "The years we shared... best of... my life."

A hesitant knock at the door interrupted them. Susan looked up to see their eleven-year-old son standing in the doorway. "It's Alex. Alex, come in..."

She let him take her place at David's side, gave them their own time together.

Afterwards, David Campbell drifted off into a sleep from which he never woke. Four days later, he was dead.

Not long after that, Susan was wrenched from her mourning by the Time Scoop, an artifact revived
from the Dark Times of Gallifrey. It deposited her in the Death Zone along with her grandfather. She was too stunned to exchange more than a few words with him. Then they were overtaken by events and had no time to talk. Everything was a blur, and then she was returned to Earth as if nothing had happened. It felt like another nightmare, as if with David dead, her soul was drawn back towards her birth planet. Yet she remained stranded on Earth. She pushed her memories of Gallifrey to the back of her mind.

Susan immersed herself in human society with renewed determination, though she felt like an empty shell, only going through the motions of human life. It was Alex, with his youthful resilience, who pulled her through that dark winter.

Eventually, Susan emerged from the numbness of her grief with a strengthened resolve to continue the work she and David had begun together: the rebuilding of human civilization. She missed him terribly, but she knew that she had always been likely to outlive him. A Gallifreyan's natural lifespan was many times that of a human.

Human civilization did not recover as quickly as she had hoped. It did not match the memories Susan had of future history. Had something gone awry with the timelines? As a child, she had been taught methods of divination that would reveal such changes, but she had forsworn all such arcane techniques when she had fled Gallifrey with her grandfather. (All such techniques except one: she had manipulated her own biology to be compatible with her human husband. Alex was the result.)

Susan bargained for help for poor beleaguered Earth from friendly aliens. Her calls were overheard by her grandfather, prompting him to finally return to find her again. She could tell at once that it had been longer for him than for her. He brought trouble and assistance in a tangled knot, as usual. The aliens turned out not to be as friendly as she had hoped. Her grandfather dealt with them easily enough. Her son was a different matter; he had not known that his mother was not human.

It would take time for them all to come to terms with their new family. They had time, now that her grandfather had promised to visit a bit more often.

They had time, until they didn't.

It was the Daleks. It was always the Daleks.

Earth was invaded again, and at the end, only Susan and her grandfather were left. Alex was dead. The Doctor's human companions were dead. And too many others to count, of the Dalek plague and Dalek guns and Dalek slave camps.

Her grandfather fled again, this time teetering on the edge of madness. Susan stayed behind, this time with no David Campbell and no hope. There was nothing left on Earth for her. For the first time in years, she felt utterly alone and alien. She thought about starting again. Working with the human survivors. Rebuilding.

But she couldn't bring herself to reach out to them. She was too tired, too lost. Instead, she went to the only other TARDIS in reach.

"Monk," she said to the Time Lord who answered the door.

"Susan," said the Monk. "I see your grandfather left you behind, even after lecturing me about responsibility. What can I do for you, my dear child?"

"Take me home," said Susan flatly. She saw that he looked genuinely guilty, but she understood that it would not last. Her grandfather had forced him to confess to his responsibility for the Dalek
invasion, but it was not a burden the Monk would bear for long. She could already see him rearranging his thoughts to blame the Doctor for everything. "It's the least you can do."

"Yes, yes, of course," said the Monk, forcing a laugh. "We can all do with some recuperation on a civilized world."

He left her in the Capitol on Gallifrey.

"I don't want to see you ever again," she said to him after he had dropped her off.

He had only cleared his throat nervously and replied, "Yes, I suppose that's for the best. Well, good-bye, Susan."

She didn't bother to answer. Only waited until he left again.

The Capitol was as alien as any world Susan had ever visited. She had never lived there before, only visited it a few times as a child. Now she called upon a distant uncle for help. There was some bureaucratic fuss from the Time Lords for her return from exile, but the uncle was able to settle all ruffled feathers and find her a quiet position in one of the archives, filing reports of distant civilizations.

"I thought it'd be a good fit, with your... unusual... experiences," explained her uncle. Susan could see that he was uneasy in her company, and only wanted to file her away safely so that he wouldn't have to think about his peculiar (possibly mad) niece any more.

Susan didn't mind. The silence and the boredom were almost comforting.

It was worse when, tired of not seeing the sky, she ventured outside. Amidst the arid beauty of her homeworld, she could only think that Alex would never see it. She had once dreamed of showing Gallifrey to her son someday. Now she had no dreams left.

She felt more alone than ever. After a few years, she knew that she would never fit into Gallifreyan society. They had nothing to say to her and she had nothing to say to them. She was too strange, too tainted by her association with aliens and renegades.

Susan moved to the outlands. Even among the Outsiders, she was considered odd, but they at least accepted her for what she was. She took to long, solitary hikes into the wilderness. The others worried for her sake, warning her of the hazards, but she shook off their warnings. The edge of danger was the only measure she had for her will to survive, the only proof that she would not simply fade away.

"Child of Destiny." The woman's voice called to her from the shadows beyond the warm light of Susan's campfire.

She knew at once who it must be. Only one group of people ever called her that. She searched the darkness for the robed figure she knew must be there. "Grandmother."

"Years flow like water, but here we are again." It was a nun of the Weeping Sisterhood, not Susan's literal grandmother. As a toddler, Susan's family had given her to the order to raise. It was their tradition that one child in each generation should become a Weeping Sister. The nun stepped into the light, pushing back the hood of her dust-brown robe to reveal an unfamiliar face, ancient and lined,
but the telepathic signature was clear. It was the nun called "Truthless". "Will you return to us?"

Susan was silent, watching the nun squat on the other side of the fire.

Truthless sighed. "Child of Destiny..."

"Why do you call me that?" As a child, she had found the title incomprehensible yet oppressive. Her earliest divinations showed her only terrifying glimpses of sorrow and loss.

"You were too young to understand. But it's different now: you have a right to know," said Truthless. "We call you that because you are the linchpin of our victory."

"Victory? What victory? Over what?" Susan was more confused than ever. She had always known that Gallifrey was full of odd cultists in robes spouting incomprehensible mumbo-jumbo, but since this one was family, she made an effort to listen.

"We are called the Weeping Sisters. Haven't you ever wondered what it is we weep for?"

Susan shook her head. She had learned the name when she was too young for it to have any meaning for her.

"The Weeping Sisters originated in a timeline that no longer exists. In that timeline, as in ours, Gallifreyans have always been time sensitive. In the ancient time, it was an empire ruled by a tyrannical oracle."

"The Pythia?" Susan knew the name from the histories she had studied as a child.

"Yes. But as one empire decays, another rises. Rassilon overthrew the Pythia and ushered in the age of the Time Lords. The Pythia's last followers fled to Karn, where their descendants remain to this day."

Susan nodded. "But that's what happened. That is our history."

"Ah, but in the original timeline, the Pythia did not die so easily. She cursed all of Gallifrey, cursed its people to an eon of barrenness. Such was her power that infants died in their wombs." Truthless shook her head, poking a dry stick into the fire. "The weeping of the mothers overwhelmed the minds of the whole world. That was when Gallifreyans learned to shield their minds and communicate henceforth with spoken words."

Susan's eyes were wide and shocked. "Is this true? Did that really happen?"

"You should know better than to ask that," chided Truthless. "Things happen, things change, things unhappen, and history flows in many channels."

"But history can't be changed. There would be chaos," protested Susan, remembering the death of her son. If events could be changed... no, too dangerous to think it. "The laws of time..."

"Laws established by Rassilon out of self-interest, to protect his own new-born empire," said Truthless. She watched the end of her stick burn, then stubbed out the flame in the dirt. Smoke twirled up in a thin line. "Do you think the mothers stopped at weeping? They formed the sisterhood with one purpose: to undo the curse."

"If that's true, they must have succeeded," said Susan. "Children are born from mothers on Gallifrey now, aren't they?" She knew that some were woven from genetic looms, but others came from natural births, as she herself had.
"The Pythia was the voice of all Gallifrey. Her power was immense. Her curse couldn't simply be ripped from the web of time. We had to wait until the curse faded naturally in the passing of ages." Truthless was silent for a long time before she continued, "And then we could pull another layer of truth over the previous truth, by finding the last natural born child of old Gallifrey and reweaving it into the present day. All the time in between would then be covered over..."

Susan frowned, wondering if that could work. She remembered what the nuns had taught her in childhood, lessons that she hadn't completely understood at the time. "You can do that? Without shattering the web of time?"

"We had to make some changes to Gallifreyan biology, but yes. With great care and precision, even the Pythia's curse could be undone."

"When? When did you...?" Susan struggled to phrase the question correctly. "When did the curse fade? What was your... point of insertion?"

"You, Susan. You were the last natural-born child from the old timeline, the last born before the Pythia's curse," said Truthless.

"Me?" Susan shook her head. "No. I don't remember. If it was true, wouldn't I remember?"

"That you don't remember means that our success was complete," explained Truthless. "The other timeline no longer exists. But we have techniques to view the alternatives. If you wish to learn, you are welcome to return to the sisterhood."

"I don't know." Susan stared blankly at the fire. It was slowly dying as she neglected to feed it. Then another thought occurred to her. "Grandfather. Did he... does he know any of this?"

"It's always difficult to say what the Doctor does or doesn't know," said Truthless.

"He took me off Gallifrey with him," said Susan. "Why did he do that?"

"Because you asked." Truthless's aged lips bent in a smile. "And I think because you reminded him of himself as a child."

Susan looked at Truthless, startled. "You knew my grandfather as a child?"

Truthless nodded. "I'm his cousin. But I'm not like you; I didn't join the sisterhood until I was an adult. I remember it was the year before you were born."

"What was he like?" Susan had only known her grandfather as the crotchety old man who sometimes visited her at the abbey. Thinking back, she realized that he had also been visiting his cousin.


"That doesn't sound like him at all!" Susan couldn't imagine her grandfather without his constant flow of words.

Truthless chuckled. "I know. Yet he was silent back then. You had to pry the thoughts out of his head. It was only after he met Koschei that he changed."

"Koschei?" asked Susan, not recognizing the name.
"Another strange boy. Went renegade in the end, too, as I heard it," said Truthless, shaking her head. "It doesn't matter. But what about you?"

"Me?" Susan shrugged wearily. "I'm back on Gallifrey, and here I'm likely to stay. I've had enough of living as a renegade."

"But here you are, alone in the wastelands. Is this really what you want?" Truthless looked at Susan earnestly across the glow of the dying campfire. "As you are my cousin's grandchild, I do feel a certain responsibility for you. I meant my offer to you: you will always have a place with us. You can return to the abbey with me."

"I..." began Susan, intending to refuse again. Then she thought of Alex. The Weeping Sisters knew how to change history safely. They had done it on a massive scale. One life. Surely Susan could learn how to save a single life? Susan ducked her head, ashamed of her selfishness. But she couldn't resist. "Yes. Yes, I'd like that. Thank you, Grandmother."

Susan had finally found a place on Gallifrey for herself.

Chapter End Notes

Canon, what canon? Obviously, I'm going with Big Finish rather than "Legacy of the Daleks" for events after "The Dalek Invasion of Earth", plus a bit of "Lungbarrow", plus whatever the heck I feel like adding to the mix.
"The Time Lords knew it was coming, like a storm on the wind." --- The Doctor (Heaven Sent)

Chapter Summary

Idiocy must run in the family, which is to say, Susan's story (part 2 of 3).

"If you've won, if Gallifrey is as it should be, why does the Sisterhood still weep?" asked Susan. In the months since she had arrived at the abbey, she had seen little of joy in the eyes of the nuns. The abbess, a stern ancient who called herself "Heartless", kept the sisters busy night and day at a mysterious project Susan was not yet qualified to work on. "Why does everyone look so frightened?"

"Every victory must be guarded," answered Truthless. She and Susan enjoyed a peaceful moment on an open terrace on the mountainside where the abbey was half-built, half-carved out of the sheer stone face. Their voices were raised against the wind. "What can be done can be undone."

"But who would want to?" protested Susan. "Surely everyone agrees that it's a good thing that our people can bring new life into the world?"

"Our world is not the only one. There exist creatures that would kill us all if they could," said Truthless. She glanced briefly at Susan before turning back to stare out at the open vista on the other side of the low wall that bounded the terrace. "You of all people should know that."

"Yes," said Susan, head bowing with the weight of memory. "I know."

"Have you spoken to Sister Timeless?"

"Only once," said Susan. That had been when she first returned to the abbey, and Susan had not sought her out since. Timeless reminded Susan too much of her childhood nightmares. She held the title of "Visionary" in the Weeping Sisterhood, but the visions had left her mind in tatters.

During Susan's visit, Timeless had stared right through her, her pen ceaselessly scratching out prophecies onto the papers before her, all the while mumbling incomprehensibly. Susan had felt herself on the brink of understanding, but flinched away at the last moment, terrified of falling into the same abyss of madness.

"Timeless sees a storm on the horizon. Reality itself is threatened. And she hears the voices of the enemy. Voices chanting only one word..."

_Exterminate_! The grating, mechanical voice thrust itself into Susan's thoughts. She gasped, "No! Not them. Please, no, it can't be. Not again."

Truthless gripped the edge of the wall, arms rigid. Her gaze was fixed on the distant valley. "The Daleks. You will have to be strong. Not only you. All of us."

Daleks.

At first it was only a nightmare of the Weeping Sisterhood.
The word from the Capitol was all of civil strife among the Time Lords. Turmoil spread outwards to engulf most of Gallifrey, bringing plague and whispers of terrorist infiltration from alien powers.

As one wave flattens, another rises.

Somehow, without overt declaration, another war began. The High Council called upon all Gallifreyans, throwing open the doors of the Time Lord Academy to recruit as widely as possible. Everyone who could fight was drafted into service.

At last, Susan had something to talk about. She put aside her private studies and returned to the Capitol. Her personal experience of the Daleks had suddenly become valuable. A young Time Lord secretary was assigned as her liaison to the High Council.

"You've met them, and survived," he explained in tones of awed respect, after introducing himself as Nialliastignamble ("Call me Niall") of the Dromeian Chapter. "How did you defeat them? What was it like?"

"It was horrible," said Susan. The memories flooded back into her thoughts. She forced herself to speak calmly of each encounter she had endured with the Daleks. She told Niall what she knew of Dalek history. She described Skaro and the Dalek city. She talked about living through multiple invasions of Earth. She didn't mention Alex.

Memories were not enough. Susan had Niall find more direct ways for her to assist in the war effort. She knew the Weeping Sisters were engaged in building temporal barriers to protect the timeline, but Susan, not yet a full initiate, lacked the skills. It would take a decade or more to complete her training, a decade she didn't even know if they would have.

She was assigned to the TARDIS repair workshops. There, day by day, she saw the war TARDISes grow ever more battered, ever more heavily armed. They survived appalling amounts of damage, with shards of wounded time warping their shells and navigation circuits, only to be sent back into battle after cursory, jury-rigged repairs.

Niall flitted in and out, bringing news from the High Council, staying longer and longer until, exasperated, Susan told him to either help with the repairs or leave her alone. He stayed. He wasn't David Campbell, could never be David, but at least he was someone willing to talk to her.

"Where is Grandfather?" Susan asked with increasing frequency as the war worsened. "He could make the difference. I know he could."

"The Doctor refuses to fight," said Niall. "Believe me, they've sent messages, both to him and to his TARDIS. He only replied once, early on, saying that he wanted no part of the war."

"What about President Romana? I heard that she used to travel with Grandfather. Surely she must have asked him...?"

Niall shook his head. "She asked. That was the time he actually replied."

"Oh." Susan sighed in disappointment.

"What about you, Lady Susan?" Niall only used her courtesy title when he wanted to emphasize her direct link to the Doctor, who was the high-ranking Time Lord rather than Susan in her own right. "Why don't you ask him?"

"No, no, I couldn't," said Susan, shaking her head quickly. "I couldn't ask that of him. Not... not after everything that happened last time. There's nothing I could say that he doesn't already know."
"Then we're on our own," said Niall, smiling bitterly. "When push comes to shove, a renegade is a renegade."

"Don't say that," said Susan. "I'm a renegade, too."

"But you're different. You came back."

"For all the good that does," said Susan. Eventually, she stopped asking after the Doctor. Another thought sprouted in her mind, growing from a wild fancy to an idea that refused to let go: if her grandfather wouldn't fight, they needed someone else who would. Someone powerful enough to take on the Daleks, someone legendary. Someone loyal to Gallifrey.

"Rassilon?" Niall was skeptical. "He's been dead for millions of years. And what could he do against the Daleks, anyway? He's a relic of the Dark Times."

"No, his mind lives on. I met him once in the Death Zone, in his so-called tomb," said Susan. "He's the founder of our society. He created the Time Lords. I'm sure he'll do whatever is necessary to save them. We just need to give him the chance."

"Maybe," said Niall slowly.

"You have contacts, Niall. Get me an audience with the Lady President. Please," she begged him. "This is important."

It didn't take that much to persuade him. He knew as well as she how badly the war was going. President Romana was another matter.

"Absolutely not!" said Romana, with such finality that Susan was left stammering through the arguments she had prepared.

"B-but he's the Conqueror of the Yssgaroth. And the Great Vampires. He won those wars, didn't he? He's the person we need, now," said Susan.

"No." And that was her last word on the matter.

Susan blinked back tears of frustration as she stumbled out of the presidential office, her brilliant idea reduced to shambles.

Niall met her outside, sympathetic but unsurprised. "After all, there can only be one president of Gallifrey, and Rassilon's not likely to submit to Lady Romana, is he?"

"I suppose not," said Susan. She hadn't thought Romana would be so petty, but perhaps the war, in addition to the power and stress of high office, had changed her. Romana would hardly be the first Time Lord to have been corrupted. "Oh, but what are we going to do now?"

Niall didn't reply immediately. Instead, he took her to a rose garden hidden on a rooftop deep in the Capitol. The dome was visible overhead, red-tinged light filtering through. The roses were in bloom, pearl-gray with a light, sweet scent. Niall plucked one and offered it to Susan. "A Rose of Rassilon."

Susan was surprised into a soft laugh. She raised the rose to her face and sniffed at it. "I didn't know he liked gardening." She went to the edge of the garden, peering over the edge at the city below. She raised her hand and flung the rose into the air. "I wish Romana would listen."

Niall said from behind Susan, "It's no use wishing. But Susan, you still think it's important, don't you?"
"Of course it's important! The Time Lords don't know how to wage war. It's been such a long time since they ever had to do anything. Rassilon could change that. I'm sure he could," said Susan, watching the rose spiraling down out of sight.

"Well, I agree with you. And there are others on the High Council who do, too," said Niall, his voice low and conspiratorial.

"Others?" Susan turned sharply. "You mean, you told them?"

"I hardly said anything. But as soon as I mentioned Rassilon, the idea was obvious to anyone not blinded by private ambition. Unfortunately, that's a minority in the High Council. Romana's influence is still too strong; the vote went against us." Niall glanced around, then said in an even lower voice, "But... maybe we can do something on our own."

"But that would mean going against the president!" Hearing her own words, Susan hastily lowered her voice as well. "It's treason."

"It's important. You said so yourself."

Even as Niall spoke, Susan's vision dimmed. Or perhaps it was the light which dimmed: smoke darkened the sky, the sky which showed through the broken shards of the dome that no longer covered the Capitol. The wind turned dry and cold, carrying with it the stench of rot and ashes. The roses withered in an instant to dust around her.

"Niall!" Susan grabbed for Niall's arm. "What's happening?"

As soon as she touched him, the world returned to normal. Susan stepped back with a gasp.

"What's wrong?" Niall's face showed only confusion.

Susan shook her head. "Nothing. It hadn't happened. It was only another potential overlaying itself over the present. It would become reality if the Gallifreyan defenses failed. They might all already be dead in the war. "You're right. It is important. It could be our only chance to survive this. Romana can lock me up later if she wants. I don't care."

"Lord Rassilon would grant us pardons," said Niall.

"But first we have to resurrect him. He can't lead us properly if he's just a disembodied voice speaking from his tomb," said Susan, her mind turning to practicalities. "Talk to your friends on the High Council if you need to, so that we can get access to the equipment we need."

As it turned out, it wasn't as simple as weaving a new body from a genetic loom and summoning Rassilon's mind from the Matrix.

"He's locked away in another universe," explained Niall. He and Susan were meeting this time outside the city, on a crumbling hillside in the dry lands. "He tried to return once before, when Romana was new in office. She exiled him to this other universe. The CIA covered it all up. One of my contacts managed to dig the story out of a former operative."

"Exiled him to another universe? That's rather extreme!" Susan smacked her palm on a boulder in disgust. That had been ages ago, so it couldn't be just the stress of war that made Romana unreasonable.

"She also exiled the Doctor to that universe during the same incident," added Niall. "Issued orders to destroy him if he ever tried to return."
"What? She turned against Grandfather, too?" Susan could hardly believe Romana's treachery.

"Oh, well, they forgave him eventually, probably because the CIA needed him for something or other," said Niall. "But Lord Rassilon is still trapped in this other universe."

"So how do we get him out?" asked Susan.

"That's where we need your help," said Niall.

"Me?"

Niall nodded. "Coordinator Narvin is loyal to Romana, which means the CIA won't help us. In fact, we'll be lucky if they don't arrest us first. The Sisterhood on Karn has the resources, but they've always hated Lord Rassilon. Which leaves the other sisterhood..." Niall looked at Susan. "That's where you come in."

"The Weeping Sisterhood?" Susan considered. It was true that they had the skills and technology to manipulate timelines. Getting into another universe should be possible for them. "The abbey does have the resources to do it, I suppose."

"Then you must convince them to help us," said Niall.

Sister Truthless's gentle "no" was nowhere near as abrupt as President Romana's refusal. This time Susan was determined not to give up, not for anything.

"Please," she begged. "For Gallifrey's sake. The Sisterhood has worked too hard to save Gallifrey to lose it to the Daleks."

"None of us wants that," said Truthless. "But Rassilon. Ah, Rassilon. A ruthless and domineering tyrant, by some accounts."

"Yet also a wise man devoted to the welfare of his people," argued Susan. "If it wasn't for him, Gallifrey would have fallen long ago to the Yssgaroth or the Great Vampires."

"Maybe," said Truthless. "But if you unleash Rassilon upon our age, who knows what he might do?"

"We don't know, and that's exactly why we need him. We need his vision! His courage! We don't need to love him. It's a matter of survival. Gallifrey's survival."

Truthless sighed.

Susan could see that she was wavering, and pressed the point. "Or are the Sisterhood's defenses enough to protect Gallifrey from the Daleks?"

Truthless answered only with a slight shake of her head, lowering her eyes in defeat.

"Then we need something more. Or we'll all be dead." Susan remembered her unsettling vision in the rose garden. "I think... I think very soon the Time Lords will suffer defeat, a defeat that percolates back in time. I saw... I saw it. Haven't you?"

"We've all seen terrible things," said Truthless. "The Sisterhood is treading a narrow path with the abyss on every side."
"So we must act before Gallifrey falls, mustn't we? Please, Grandmother, it's the only way," said Susan. "We have no other choice."

"There's always a choice. But this is too important for me to decide alone. I'll call for a formal vote, and we can plead your case to the others."

The vote was held in a chamber deep in the heart of the abbey, a chamber far larger than it had any right to be. Each Weeping Sister had her own seat, a chair fitted with ancient yet sophisticated psychic amplifiers. The vote was not decided with spoken or written ballots, but with telepathically melded visions. The visions were a combination of conscious and unconscious analysis, divination, and dreams. The result was projected (complete with sight, sound, and emotional resonance) into the circular space at the center of the chamber.

To Susan's relief, the consensus was drawn narrowly in her favor.

As the head of the order, Sister Heartless made the final decision. "There is danger in this gamble, but we are agreed: it is necessary. Susan, summon your allies among the High Council. I will speak with them."

Heartless did more than speak with them. She kept them in the abbey's audience chamber until they agreed to her terms. Susan, Truthless, and a handful of the other sisters sat silently behind Heartless, lending psychological support to the abbess. Sister Timeless, the Visionary, lurked in the corner, occupied as ever with her mumbling and scribbling.

In an effort to gain the Sisterhood's assistance for free, the Time Lord spokesman tried to appeal to their loyalty to Gallifrey, to their duty in this time of war.

Heartless was having none of it. She set the price of the Sisterhood's help at two seats on the High Council.

"No, that's ridiculous," scoffed the spokesman. The other Time Lords in the delegation nodded in agreement. "It's called the High Council of the Time Lords. You aren't Time Lords."

"Precisely the point," countered Heartless. "This war affects everyone on Gallifrey, yet it's the Time Lords who make all the decisions. It's past time the rest of us have a voice in our government."

The argument went back and forth for hours, with tradition on one side and necessity on the other. At last, reluctantly and with distaste written all over their faces, the Time Lords capitulated to the Sisterhood's demands.

"Two seats. And which of you will occupy those seats?" The Time Lord spokesman scanned the occupants of the room in scorn.

Heartless nodded first at Timeless. "Her."

The Time Lords gave each other appalled looks. Then one of them muttered, "Just as well. We can stick her in a corner and she won't interfere with anything important."

Heartless said coldly, "She is a Visionary of the Weeping Sisterhood. That means she is psychically linked to the soul of Gallifrey. If she seems mad, it's only a reflection on the state of our world."

"Superstitious gobbledy-gook," grumbled one of the Time Lords.

Susan bit her lip to keep from speaking out of turn. She knew by now that "soul of Gallifrey" was
the Sisterhood's term for the collective telepathic imprint of all the sentient lifeforms on the planet. The Sisterhood's technology and psychic skills were in fact highly advanced, in directions not recognized by Time Lord tradition.

"As for our other representative..." Heartless indicated Truthless. "Sister Truthless will be taking her place among you."

The Time Lords studied Truthless for a long moment. Finally, the spokesman nodded with grudging respect. "Very well. When can you begin? The sooner, the better. That way there's less chance for something to go wrong."

Heartless held up a hand. A fist-sized black cube was held between her fingers. "Not yet. We must seal our bargain."

"What is that?" asked the spokesman.

"It's a tissue sampler. Each of you here will contribute."


"Insurance," explained Heartless. "If you renege on our deal, then we'll make sure you were never Time Lords either. A failed exam here, an indiscretion there: it's not difficult to tweak your timeline once we have your biodata."

The spokesman shuddered in disgust. One of the other Time Lords muttered, "Witches! Still living in the Dark Times."

The spokesman gestured for silence, then took a deep breath. "All right. If you insist." Susan saw him give the other Time Lords a look as if to say, just humor the old bitch. Aloud, he said, "It's for the sake of Lord Rassilon. Just do as she says."

"They need two months to set up the equipment, and then they'll do the extraction," Susan told Niall when she returned to the Capitol. The two of them met for their midday meal, which consisted of cubes from a machine. Susan still missed Earth food. The cooking of the Weeping Sisters, based on native Gallifreyan plants and fungi, was comfortably familiar but bland. "The abbess put Sister Truthless in charge of the operation."

"I knew you could convince them," said Niall. "Will you go back when they do it?"

Susan nodded. "I won't be much help, but I can be another pair of hands. And... it was my idea. I should be there in case anything goes wrong."

"Nothing will go wrong," said Niall in a confident tone. "I'm still trying to get myself assigned to the Time Lord delegation. Imagine it. Lord Rassilon back again!"

Even with all their safeguards, the Weeping Sisterhood calculated a moderate level of risk in the extraction process. Truthless ordered everyone to stay outside while she alone went into the chamber that served as a kind of airlock between the two universes. Everything could theoretically be done from the control station located just outside the airlock, but Truthless insisted on going inside in case the controls failed and she needed to close the portal manually. She had her own set of data screens and scanners inside the airlock. She made a bulky figure, clad in a baggy white environment suit to protect her from toxins from the alternate universe as well as from temporal hazards.
Susan watched anxiously from the control room, along with the Sisterhood technicians and the Time Lord delegation. A little to Susan's disappointment, Niall was not among them. "Synchronization in one hundred microspans..." said one of the Sisters. As the countdown proceeded, the technicians went through their last checklist. Everyone breathed easier when everything was ticked off correctly.

"Timelines locked. Interface established. Initiating biodata trace..."

"Try parallel nine by four," said Truthless, her voice distorted by her suit's comlink unit. "I saw a blip on my scanner."

After what felt like hours, the technicians achieved a fix on their target. The portal between the two universes opened at last. Blinding light filled the airlock. Susan shielded her eyes with her arm. Then an eerie wailing, howling noise filled the air, punctuated by bone-shivering thumps. The sound was not transmitted through the speakers. It seemed to shriek directly into their minds.

"Something's wrong."

Susan couldn't tell who had spoken, but the ominous words were followed by a frantic scramble for explanation and recovery from the technicians. She couldn't hear them over the noise apparently emanating from the opened portal. A distorted scream cut through the sound.

"That's Truthless!" Susan leaped to her feet at once and sprinted to the door of the airlock. "We have to get her out of there."

"No, wait, don't open that!" Someone tried to pull Susan back, but she ignored them. She began turning the heavy metal wheel to unseal the door. At some point, the eerie noise ceased, but Susan paid it no mind. The door unsealed with a popping sound. Susan pushed it open and hurried inside.

The bright light had mercifully faded away. The portal was closed again.

Truthless lay outstretched on the floor in front of the portal. A man knelt next to her, his back to Susan, but she could see that he had his head bent over her face and his fingers pressed to the nun's temples. The hood of her protective suit was open, forming a thin cushion under her head.

"Grandmother!" Susan moved forward. She said to the stranger, "What are you doing to her?"

At this, the man straightened, standing and turning to face Susan. He loomed over her with an aura of such fierce presence that Susan involuntarily backed away again. When he spoke, his voice was absolute in its certainty. "She saved you from an invasion from creatures of such power and horror... things too terrible to imagine. She closed the portal in time, but the psychic shock overwhelmed her."

"Oh. Oh, I see." Susan suddenly realized who he must be. "My lord Rass---"

"Lord Rassilon!" The voices of the Time Lord delegation drowned her out. "Patris of the Vortex, First Earl of Prydon, Protector of the Seven Systems..."

The newly returned Rassilon strode past Susan into the welcoming circle of his followers. Susan paid them no more attention. She went to Truthless, praying that she wasn't dead.

In mingled shock and relief, Susan found that Truthless had regenerated. She was now a woman of middling height and years, her dark hair beginning to be streaked with gray. She had regenerated, but she did not wake. Susan brushed her forehead with her fingers, reaching out mentally.
Chaos. Pain.

The eerie noise of the other universe echoed in the nun's mind.

Susan gasped and drew back. By then, the other Weeping Sisters had come to offer Truthless what care they could. They lifted her onto a gurney and wheeled her into one of the abbey's sickrooms.

"Will she be all right?" Susan hovered over the unconscious form. Sleep was natural after a difficult regeneration, but she couldn't help worrying.

"She held the portal closed with the force of her own will. Whatever was on the other side was trying to break through," explained one of the technicians who had been at the controls earlier. "She fought them off, but the psychic backlash nearly killed her. As it is, it may be weeks before she recovers."

"I'll stay by her side," Susan promised. She closed her fingers around Truthless's right hand, squeezed gently. She studied the new face, already marked with lines of responsibility. I'm sorry, thought Susan. But you didn't lose a life for nothing. Rassilon is back. He'll save Gallifrey. He must.
"Take the blade." --- Rassilon (Zagreus)

Chapter Summary

The running dogs of Rassilon! (Susan's story, part 3 of 3.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"It was glorious," said Niall. He sat facing Susan across a marble table in a small pavilion just outside the abbey. Nominally dedicated to divination through gaming, the pavilion was more commonly used to meet visitors in a less formal setting than the audience chamber. "As soon as he set foot inside the Panopticon, you could feel it in the air: the Redeemer was here to save us. Even those stiff-necked fools who once opposed us bowed to Lord Rassilon. Only a few recalcitrants chose to leave with ex-President Romanadvoratrelundar."

"Oh," said Susan faintly. It had been a week since Rassilon's return. Sister Truthless was only intermittently conscious. Niall had slipped away from the Capitol to tell Susan the latest news. In a few days, Rassilon had completely shaken up the Time Lord hierarchy. "Where is Romana now?"

Niall shrugged. "No one knows for certain. She took a TARDIS and left, along with her pet savage, once it was clear that she had lost her support among the Time Lords. Odds are that she's gone to Braxiatel. He's said to have his own planetoid hidden away somewhere far from Gallifrey."

"Braxiatel?" Susan had only met him a few times, a long time ago. Her impression was of a clever, secretive man who had his own agenda separate from the other Time Lords. She hoped Romana was safe with him. Susan felt a twinge of guilt, now that it was too late to change her mind. "Poor Romana. It must have been a shock."

"A rest will do her good," said Niall. "She's not a bad person, really, but her judgement is flawed when it comes to allies."

"What do you mean?"

"When she became president, she insisted on reaching out to all those alien races. Brought Gallifrey no end of trouble. And this time, when she felt her grip slipping, she turned to the Adherents of Ohm, of all people!" Niall shook his head in disbelief. "Bring back Omega? What were they thinking?"

Omega was another legendary figure from Gallifreyan history. Susan had considered him herself, but dismissed the idea, as Omega had been an engineer, not a warrior or a leader. She said as much to Niall.

"Oh, I know," said Niall. "A damned brilliant engineer, to give him credit, but not a stable personality. I don't know if you ever heard, but he actually tried to destroy the Time Lords before."

"No..." Susan hadn't heard.

"Completely mad." Niall waved a hand in emphasis. "Anyway, Lord Rassilon put a stop to all that.
He opened the Omega Arsenal for the High Council. He said we only needed the weapons, not the man himself."

"Sounds like an eventful week," said Susan.

"That's not the half of it," said Niall. "Rassilon said the old weapons would not be enough. He set up a dozen new projects, based on ideas he had during his exile but never had the chance to implement. He's set the whole Capitol buzzing. And it's all down to you, Susan."

"Hardly 'all'," said Susan. She dropped her gaze to the table, where a grid of lines etched into the surface formed a game board. She traced a finger along the lines, uneasy with taking the credit for Rassilon. "I only talked to people..."

"The right people," said Niall. "If not for you, the old stick-in-the-muds would still be debating what-ifs and maybes until the Dalek Supreme blasted them to eternity right in the middle of the Panoptican."

"I hope I did the right thing," said Susan. She stared at the table, wondering if she had made her moves wisely, but the board gave her no insight.

"Gallifrey has hope again," said Niall. "Hope that Lord Rassilon may lead the Time Lords to victory. How can that be wrong?"

Susan sighed and shook her head. She wished Romana and Rassilon had cooperated instead of seeing each other as competition. She had seen enough of such infighting among humans. Worse, it was a weakness the Daleks could exploit. She supposed that Rassilon knew that as well as anyone, and that explained his streak of ruthlessness. But it bothered her despite her rationalizations.

"You're upset by what happened to Sister Truthless?" guessed Niall. "Don't worry. She'll recover. The Weeping Sisterhood may not have the Elixir of Life, but their medical skills are among the best on Gallifrey."

Susan didn't answer, not knowing how to explain her disquiet. He hadn't seen Rassilon turn his back on the woman who had sacrificed a life for his return. Then again, empathy was not much valued among the Time Lords. Niall was unusual in caring one jot about what Susan felt.

Niall reached out to cover her hand with his. He squeezed lightly. "You wait and see. When all of Gallifrey is celebrating victory, everyone will be grateful to you."

Susan couldn't help but smile. "You're very optimistic. Never mind. I'm fine. You go back to the Capitol; you're needed there. I'll go with Grandmother Truthless when she takes her place on the High Council."

To Susan's relief, Niall was right about the Sisterhood's medical competence. Truthless was awake and alert when Susan came to report the news he had brought.

"The sooner I get to the Capitol, the better," said Truthless. "Someone needs to keep an eye on Lord Rassilon. Sister Timeless may be a visionary, but translating visions into action isn't easy."

"Will you be all right?" Susan asked. She checked the monitoring devices still attached to Truthless. "That regeneration. They said your mind was shattered."

"It took awhile to piece myself back together, but I'm quite sane now. Don't look so worried, child," said Truthless. "No, what concerns me is what Lord Rassilon's up to. New weapons projects, you
"Yes," said Susan. "But isn't that why we brought him back?"

"Yes. But..." Truthless frowned. After a long silence, she said slowly, "When we brought him back. Right after I closed the portal, I thought... I can't be certain, but it seems to me that he was in my mind..."

Susan remembered seeing Rassilon with his hands on Truthless. "He may have been checking to see if you were alive."

"Perhaps. But at that point, I had no defense. I was... dead. Who knows what memories he stole from my mind?" Truthless rubbed at her eyes and winced. "Sisterhood secrets. Our technology. We've never used it for harm, but who knows what Lord Rassilon might do with it?"

"We're at war," said Susan. "If Sisterhood technology can defeat the Daleks, what's so bad about that?"

"You don't know how dangerous it is," said Truthless. "Meddling with the timelines..."

"It can't be worse than Gallifrey falling to the Daleks," said Susan. "Nor worse than a universe where Daleks are the only things left alive."

"Maybe so, but..." Truthless eyed the monitors. "But I'll be better able to judge once I'm in the Capitol. We'll leave tomorrow morning."

The atmosphere in the Capitol was superficially optimistic, but underneath the hope for a quick victory lay deep fears and simmering resentments. The rule of Lord Rassilon was more stringent than the people were accustomed to. He insisted on unity. Defiance was quickly crushed.

Susan was surprised when she found out that whole families were under house arrest. It wasn't only the most fanatical Adherents of Ohm or the most stubborn ex-members of the High Council, but a wide sweep of their friends and relations and plenty of other people suspected of dissent.

"It's too much, isn't it?" Susan kept her voice low, even though she and Niall were alone in their meeting place in the dry lands. "I mean, demanding unquestioning obedience, isn't that what Daleks do, not Gallifreyans?"

"During a time of war, though," said Niall, "can we afford discord? We barely survived the last civil war, and that weakness was what brought the Daleks on us."

"But it's innocent people who haven't even done anything," said Susan. "Someone should speak to Lord Rassilon, tell him this is wrong."

"Someone?" Niall laughed, then sobered. "You may be right. Maybe he has gone too far. But if so, there's only one person who stands a chance of telling him. You."

"Me?" Susan stared at him in disbelief. "Why me?"

"Think about it. If it weren't for you, he'd still be trapped in that nightmare of a pocket universe. He has to at least appear to listen to you," said Niall.

"Lord President," Susan said in her most respectful tones. Despite Niall's words, Susan was surprised
that she had been granted this private audience with Rassilon, in the presidential office, no less. Granted an audience, but no chair. She supposed she was lucky he hadn't made her kneel in his presence, as he had the right to demand of a commoner.

Rassilon studied her with a cold, piercing gaze from the other side of his massive presidential desk. He was seated, naturally, in an elegant chair that enhanced his already formidable presence. "Lady Susan, my belated thanks for your assistance in my restoration."

"It was my honor," said Susan, doing her best to shield her mind against the psychic pressure of Rassilon's will. She suspected he had amplified it through technology. That chair was certainly not standard issue, and it shimmered strangely in her mind's eye.

"What brings you here today?"

"It's all the p-prisoners," she said, then took a breath to steady her voice. "It seems... unjust. And, and, wasteful." She made her argument as best she could against the overwhelming sense that her thoughts were unimportant distractions when placed against the President's wishes. She muddled on with her rehearsed speech until she trailed off at the end with one last appeal, "...release them, please..."

Rassilon watched her, his hands steepled before him on his desk. He waited until Susan was done, then waited some more. Finally, he said, "You may have a point. It is wasteful to keep so many of our people locked away. Perhaps I can find a better use for them."

"I didn't mean..." Susan stopped, swallowed hard, catching the sinister undertones in his reply. She hadn't meant to send them to their deaths. "Lord President, surely you can show mercy?"

Rassilon looked almost amused at that. "I will let them choose for themselves. That's as much mercy as we can afford these days. Will they spare their fellow Gallifreyans from the vital but dangerous tasks demanded by war, or would they rather stay at home doing nothing? Loyalty can be rewarded, to the surviving kin if necessary."

"I see," whispered Susan. Suicide missions, with the families of the "volunteers" to be released upon completion of the missions. She understood his reasoning, but it made her feel ill.

"Lady Susan," said Rassilon, his face now stern. "We must all do our part. That includes you."

"Me? What do you want from me?" Susan couldn't imagine what use she could be to Rassilon, now that he had all of Gallifrey at his command.

"There is too much strife among my children. Even the coordinator of the CIA has become... unreliable. But if you were to stand at my side, you, the granddaughter of our most notorious renegade, then many who now oppose me might change their minds."

"I'd be, what, some kind of mascot?" The idea did not sit well with her, but Susan remembered wishing for more cooperation among the Time Lords. If she could actually help, then her conscience wouldn't permit her to refuse. Her conscience, or was it Rassilon gnawing away at her free will?

"More than a mere mascot. You would take up the blade as the Lady Commander of the Knights of Rassilon," declared Rassilon with his usual propensity for naming things after himself. He reached into his desk and withdrew what looked like a long dagger and pushed it forwards towards Susan. Susan frowned. It was difficult to focus on, sliding in and out of her sight. A hint of metal caught the light, but the larger component of the blade was some substance that defied reality. "What is that thing? I'm not... not a warrior."
"Neither is the Doctor, yet he was the one who forged this blade for me, at my request," said Rassilon.

"Grandfather?" Susan was shocked into disbelief.

"A very special blade, hammered out of anti-time and validium," said Rassilon. "He was the only one who could handle the materials."

Susan wasn't sure what anti-time was, but she knew validium was a sentient, chaotic metal developed by the Time Lords as a weapon.

"The Doctor called it the 'vorpal blade'. An Earth reference, I believe," said Rassilon.

"'One, two! One, two! And through and through / The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!'" quoted Susan. She remembered her grandfather's fascination with the human capacity for imagination and fantastical nonsense. "Vorpal blade" was a name he might have chosen; maybe she could believe Rassilon, after all. "It's from 'Jabberwocky', a poem by Lewis Carroll."

"It can slice through time itself, through space and reality," said Rassilon. "Imagine it: cutting monsters from the web of time with surgical precision. Take the blade, Lady Susan."

Susan found herself obeying. The cold weight of the dagger in her hand snapped her out of her dazed state. She could feel the power of the weapon even through the insulated hilt. Her vision expanded. Two paths twisted out ahead of her. In one, she refused the blade. She stayed on Gallifrey until the time came when it lay as broken and defeated as Earth under the Daleks. Nothing after that except death, death, and more death.

In the other path, she kept the blade. Keeping the blade, she learned to wield it. She became a killer. (But some things need to die.) Rassilon's leashed Dalek. (Not for him. For David. For Alex. For the uncountable dead of the past, present, and future.) She had summoned Rassilon into this war. Foolish, then, to oppose him now. Better to work with him to end it, by whatever means it took. (It's your responsibility.) Where did it end? Susan saw that this path led into darkness. No matter how she strained, she saw no ending to it. (Have faith that darkness is not eternal.)

When Rassilon offered her a sheath for the dagger, Susan accepted that, too, realizing that she had made her choice. "Very well, my lord. But I'll need an assistant. If I may have Nialliastignamble..."

"Of course. Have him sent to me. I will explain his duties to him."

"Thank you, my lord."

"I'm sorry. I know I should have asked you first," said Susan. She had waited anxiously outside during Niall's meeting with Rassilon. "It's just that you were the only Time Lord I could think of, that I could trust."

Niall had emerged from the presidential office looking as dazed and frightened as Susan felt, but at her words, his expression changed. He took her hands and knelt before her. "My lady Susan, I pledge to serve as your squire, to the end of my days, with all my might and brain."

"Niall, don't be an idiot." Susan slipped free and turned away. "Stand up. And don't say it like that. It sounds more like a curse."

"I mean it." He straightened, then added softly, "You must know how I feel."
Susan shook her head. "You know that when the war is over, if I'm still alive, I'll go back to the abbey, or leave Gallifrey again."

"Susan, please. You don't need to become a nun or a renegade."

"A warrior. An assassin. That's what we need, now." Susan brushed away their other concerns. "What did Lord Rassilon tell you?"

They were issued special armor, experimental models developed by Rassilon. Susan cradled the helmet in her hands, staring into the blank visor, wondering if this made things easier or harder. Behind the visor, she would be as faceless as a Dalek.

"It's rated 7.6 with a standard deviation of 1.1," said Niall. "So that's an average of 7.6 blasts from an ordinary Dalek gun before the armor fails. Hopefully it won't come to that. The perception filters in the surcoat should prevent us being targeted."

"What about us targeting them? I'm not like Grandfather. I've never been a violent person," said Susan. Though he had always tried to spare her the worst of it, she knew how much blood stained her grandfather's hands. But now she had inherited his blade. Even sheathed, the dagger seemed to glitter with dangerous ideas.

"We're all violent people now," said Niall. "The Daleks don't leave us any space for peace."

Susan sighed, remembering that the Thals of Skaro had been pacifists when she first met them, but they, the offworld visitors, had changed that. It was for the sake of their survival, but Susan felt as if they had brought in a contagion of violence. Now that same contagion infected Gallifrey.

"It's not mindless slaughter," Niall tried to reassure her. "We'll pick our targets for maximum effect."

"It means meddling with the web of time," said Susan. That was why their armor was also designed to protect them from time distortion. "Dangerous."

"That's where I put all those Academy lectures to good use," said Niall. "Calculating which changes we can make safely. So let's do it. Try on the armor."

It slipped on like a second skin. There was no need to manually adjust or fasten anything. The psychic key triggered the low-level intelligence built into the armor, allowing it to fit itself to the wearer.

"There's Sisterhood technology in that armor," noted Truthless when Susan went to see her. "So. He wants you to fight for him."

"It's not for him. It's for the people of Gallifrey."

"That's all very well, but it's the Seal of Rassilon you wear on your back," said Truthless.

"It's a symbol of unity," said Susan. "You joined the High Council. Why shouldn't I fight alongside the Time Lord soldiers?"

"Figuratively if not literally. That's not an army uniform," said Truthless. "I can't say I approve. Nevertheless, if you've made up your mind, I can only wish you luck. Please be careful."

The new ship was an advanced stealth model. Compared to the Doctor's antique, Susan's TARDIS
was sleek, sharp, and functional. It linked to her with unnerving devotion, accepting Susan as a pilot despite her lack of formal Time Lord training.

"You don't mind?" Susan asked Niall when the two of them explored the interior of the ship, making an inventory of its capabilities.

Niall shook his head. "I can fly it if absolutely necessary, but I don't have your instincts."

"My instincts?" Susan was skeptical.

"Out of the two of us, the ship chose you. With these advanced models, you have to trust them to know. And you do have more practical experience in travel than most, Time Lord or not."

"I suppose," conceded Susan. Already she could feel the flow of information along the psychic link, which she understood to be the ship's method of teaching a new pilot. "But I'll need to take us on a few practice flights first."

They didn't have as much time as Susan would have liked. The Daleks were spreading across time and space. Their deep time colonization ships seeded every habitable world with the Dalek factor, to be incorporated into every evolving life form. Susan and Niall were sent to intercept the seed ships.

After the first dozen, Susan became adept at landing inside the Dalek ship, right on the bridge. Niall provided covering fire while Susan took out the navigation computer, using the vorpal blade to cut back along the timeline, effectively deleting this sector of spacetime from ever being known to the Daleks. Then it was back to the TARDIS and on to the next target even as the Dalek ship ceased to exist.

It wasn't enough. It was never enough. Each time Susan returned to Gallifrey, the news worsened. The Daleks adapted to Time Lord weapons and tactics almost as quickly as Gallifrey could improve on them. Savagery begat savagery. Rassilon recruited more knights. They did not have Susan's vorpal blade, but used cruder temporal manipulation devices.

Worlds burned. Once the Daleks began deploying their nano-converters, the Time Lords took to destroying entire solar systems that had been infected. They burned refugee camps, prison camps, and everything leaving a battlefield, even the hospital ships. When Susan learned of this new policy, she didn't even try to plead for Rassilon to show mercy. Her earlier moralizing speech seemed laughable now.

Time Lords sent agents time and again to Skaro, but it was too late to assassinate Davros or prevent the creation of the Daleks.

"They've learned how to generate ontological loops." Niall relayed the latest message from Gallifrey to Susan. "Daleks created by Daleks with no beginning or end. We're to cut as many of these loops from the web of time as we can find."

"It must be the work of the Time Controller," said Susan, her voice filled with pure hatred. She didn't forget, could never forgot, the Dalek responsible for her son's death. Ironically, now that she had the power to go back and save him (with the web of time in shambles, who would notice?), she chose not to. She didn't want Alex in this now inescapable war. The universe was in chaos, and if that chaos devoured Alex for a second time, Susan didn't think she could bear it.

In a moment of weakness, she told Niall about Alex. "When the war is over, I'll find him again."

That private promise kept Susan fighting, even when she was overwhelmed by the death and suffering all around her, even when she had become nothing but a butcher of Daleks. She would
save Alex once they had peace again.

Peace never seemed so far away. Susan and Niall sliced time into ribbons, sheering away the Daleks encrusted in its weave. The backlash, tidal waves of temporal distortion, nearly destroyed them more than once. Susan's TARDIS snatched them back into existence again and again. It was Niall, with his Time Lord training, who patched the timelines back together again afterwards.

Gallifrey itself was distorted. They heard rumors of the Nine Gallifreys, the Ninety-nine Gallifreys, or the Unbounded Gallifrey. Sometimes it wasn't there when they tried to return, or it was in the wrong phase, or it was simply hidden. Susan could no longer be certain of her own past. The Citadel never looked the same twice. There was an aggressive swagger to the Time Lords that had not been there before.

She asked Truthless about it once, in a brief downtime between missions.

"All our histories are in question," said Truthless. She looked haggard, having just come out of another harrowing High Council session. "Not even Rassilon can nail down the web of time anymore."

"The Daleks are winning, aren't they?" said Susan hollowly. "No matter what we do, they get worse."

"There must be some hope," said Niall, nowadays a constant presence at Susan's side. "What does the Weeping Sisterhood foresee?"

_Gallifrey falls!_

Truthless stared at them, letting that despairing wail echo through their minds.

"No," whispered Susan, her fingers clenched around the hilt of the vorpal dagger. But the same thought resonated in its heart.

"It's what we hear, over and over," said Truthless aloud. "The other possibility..."

_Gallifrey stands!"

...is far more faint." Truthless shook her head, her eyes sorrowful. "There is one other thing. The Doctor died and lives again, this time as a Warrior."

"Grandfather! He's joined the war?"

Susan didn't seek him out. Perhaps she was afraid (of what he had become). Perhaps she was ashamed (of what she had become). She only listened to the news feeds and to soldiers' tales, furtively gathering scraps of rumor of her grandfather.

"Oh, well, he'll survive us all," said Niall, sounding bitter. "Doesn't he always? Even your Sisterhood thinks so. Remember that bit of prophecy?"

"Prophecies!" Susan sighed. Truthless had let them look at her collection of prophecies gathered from the Visionary. None of them were of much use. Gallifrey was too divided, too terrified to see any clear future. "Oh, Grandfather, I hope you think of something clever. Even if it's at the last minute, as usual."

The minutes wore on, one after another, and still not the last...
Susan and Niall left Gallifrey again, pursuing their corner of the war. Susan destroyed the Dalek Time Controller more than once, but each time a new version sprang up in its place. She was forced to accept its existence as an immutable fact of the Time War. Of course, the Daleks were not the only ones to cling to existence. Other races were wiped repeatedly from the universe only to respawn themselves. Time had lost all cohesion.

Susan could only continue. By then, she could see no other path. It was only when she suffered an injury too severe for the TARDIS med-bay that Niall took her back to Gallifrey for an artificially induced and assisted regeneration.

"The Cruciform," said Niall. "Susan, wake up, this is important."

She tried. Her head was still pounding from the regeneration. Her tongue felt too thick for her to speak. She projected a question, what is it?

"We don't have time!" Niall grimaced in apology, then made sudden contact with Susan's mind, transmitting a burst of information in a few seconds.

Susan struggled to her feet in alarm, clutching Niall's arm to keep from falling over. Her mind was sluggish, but one thought was clear: Rassilon meant to kill her grandfather, and Susan had to stop him!

By the time they stood inside the secret monitoring room behind the presidential office, most of the haze had lifted from Susan's mind. They had transmatted in on Niall's key. He was the one who had restrained her from simply barging straight in to confront Rassilon.

"Why do you have a key to Rassilon's back room?" asked Susan.

Niall didn't look at her as he adjusted a view screen to show the presidential chamber, where Rassilon sat behind his desk. "He gave it to me. Sometimes he summons me in for... for special tasks. That's how I found out about his plans for the Doctor. I wasn't supposed to tell you. He even put a block on my mind, but I broke through it because..."

"I know," said Susan. His rushed telepathic transmission had contained more than the plain facts.

"And because it's your grandfather. I know you still care..."

Susan shushed him. On the screen, the outer door had opened. "It's Coordinator Narvin."

Niall twisted another control, and the voices became audible through small, tinny speakers.

"Who did you send this time?" asked Rassilon. "I hope they meet with more success than your last team."

The Cruciform: a weapon so dangerous that it had to be built on an isolated world light years and centuries away from Gallifrey. Dozens of workers had died, their timelines torn open, in the process of its construction. The CIA's first attempt to prime the Cruciform had ended with their agents reduced to primordial ooze.

"The Master," said Narvin. "He's our best chance. His timeline is the most tightly secured to the web of time, and he's unmatched among the Time Lords when it comes to personal survival."

"Almost unmatched," said Rassilon. "But will he do it? He and the Doctor were childhood friends.
"Were childhood friends," stressed Narvin. "Nowadays, no one hates the Doctor more than the Master. He'll do what's required."

"Let's hope so, for all our sakes. It will serve as some recompense for all the mischief he is responsible for," said Rassilon. "Now, send for the Doctor."

The Cruciform was designed to weave timelines together, forcing dependencies where there had been none. The Time Lords had strung the history of the Daleks across the temporal loom to form the warp threads. Now they only needed to tie another timeline, the one designated the weft, into the shuttle to complete their weave. The natural choice for the weft was the Doctor, who was already deeply tied to the destiny of the Daleks. It would be simple to bind them together.

All that was needed was to implant the Doctor's biodata into the shuttle. Then when the Doctor was dispersed with the Oubliette of Eternity, the Daleks would be undone from the universe along with him. The Oubliette of Eternity which Rassilon had installed into his presidential desk...

Narvin shuffled and cleared his throat. "Lord Rassilon... Lord President, are you sure this is wise? Much as one hates to admit it, the Doctor was responsible for saving Gallifrey, and indeed the universe, on occasion. If he's dispersed..."

"He can be replaced," said Rassilon. "What has he done that I, Rassilon, am not capable of?"

Replaced? Susan listened with growing anger. Given his past record, Rassilon was probably just trying to get rid of another perceived rival.

"But what if, as a Neverperson, he comes back for revenge?"

Susan knew from Niall that a Neverperson was what remained of a Time Lord destroyed by the Oubliette of Eternity. Narvin wouldn't worry about Daleks becoming Neverpeople, because Daleks lacked the psychic gift inborn in Gallifreyans that enabled them to survive on willpower alone.

Rassilon laughed. "He will not. Not the Doctor. No, he will pull the switch himself once he understands."

"He will?" Narvin sounded dubious.

"He's sacrificed himself for far lower stakes. This will be his ultimate victory, so selfless that he goes unremembered," said Rassilon, smirking.

"No! You can't!" Before Niall could stop her, Susan burst through the secret door to face Rassilon. "Not Grandfather!"

Rassilon showed only a moment of surprise before recovering his calm air of command. "It will end the war."

"Find another way!" Susan kept her eyes on Rassilon, only vaguely aware of Niall behind her, keeping Narvin from interfering.

"There is no other way. He's the only person with a timeline complex enough to bind the Daleks with," said Rassilon.

"What about you? It should be your biodata nailed to the Cruciform," said Susan.
"Unthinkable," said Rassilon. "I am Rassilon, the creator of the Time Lords!"

Unable to bear his smug tone any longer, Susan drew her vorpal blade and leaped over the desk towards him. "I should never have brought you back!"

Rassilon raised his fist in response. His gauntlet glowed, shooting out a blast of energy that knocked Susan off the desk to slide halfway across the floor.

Without her armor, Susan was vulnerable to the full force of the blast. Only her recent regeneration gave her the strength for a quick recovery. She scrambled back to her feet, rage twisting her features, charging forward for another attack. This time she meant to slice off his arm at the shoulder with the vorpal blade...

...but she never reached the desk. A globe of nothingness enveloped her.

*The Oubliette of Eternity.*

Susan screamed in agony as she was unmade by the power of the Oubliette. Even as she faded from existence, she thought she heard Niall shouting her name. She wanted to tell him to stay back, to flee, that his armor would be no protection, but she had no voice left.

Gone.

Never existed.

Forgotten.

Chapter End Notes

Whew. It took me awhile, but here it is: Susan and the Time War condensed into three chapters. I'm sure someone could write an entire novel about it. (Just not me.) Poor Susan. I do like Susan, but I'm an evil person who is mean to fictional characters. Eep.

If I contradict myself, remember this: each character experienced the Time War differently, possibly multiple times in overlapping realities. Events shift and objects take on a different significance depending on the point of view. If I contradict existing canon on the Time War, eh, well, canon already contradicts itself, so I'm just adding to the confusion. Sorry about that!
The corruption of the oldest civilization." --- Romana (Neverland)

Chapter Summary

In which we go on a field trip to alt!Gallifrey.

The Doctor hung by his fingertips over an abyss. If he slipped, if he fell, he would be lost forever in the raging currents of anti-time. If Niall shut the emergency doors again, the Doctor would be trapped here, and it would only be a matter of time (ha) until he lost his grip. "Listen! You. Niall. Killing me won't help Susan."

"You've never cared what happened to Susan," spat Niall.

"That's not true.″ The Doctor couldn't see Niall, but as long as he was talking, he wasn't shutting the door. "During the war... I know. We all went too far. But it has to end."

"It ended for her when she threw herself between you and Rassilon," said Niall. "But now that we have a second chance --- a second chance that you opened for us, why shouldn't we take it?"

"I made a mistake. I admit it! I do --- make mistakes. Sometimes."

"Then you should pay for them," said Niall.

The Doctor heard the creak of the doors shifting. He made a desperate effort to haul himself back into the broken TARDIS, but the pull of the abyss was too strong. "Wait! You're making a worse mistake, changing history with anti-time..."

But Niall had clearly stopped listening.

"Agh! Stupid..." The Doctor ran through the possibilities. Perhaps Zagreus could survive the passage through the emergency doors. No, that was worse than useless. Zagreus would rip the web of time apart, set fire to the remains, and laugh. Think, Doctor, think. The doors were almost shut. Only a sliver of reality remained in reach.

Reality shuddered.

A temporal shockwave swept across the broken TARDIS. Only a minuscule fraction of its energy diffracted through the slit of the nearly-closed emergency doors to reach the Doctor, but even that was almost enough to shake him loose from the frame. He forced back the future moments that threatened to overtake him, moments in which he was already scattered by the anti-time currents. He clung with all his strength to the present, his hands still gripping the edge of the door.

Catastrophic failure of the containment fields around the Eye of Harmony, he diagnosed silently and uselessly. Another shock like that and he would be dead.

"Doctor? Doctor, where have you got to now?" Missy's voice became audible in the distance.

Still unsure of the timelines, the Doctor coughed experimentally. Relieved to find that the resulting sound matched up with his internal perception, he called out, "I'm here. Give me a hand, will you?"
A few moments later, he was lying on the floor of the dynamorphic power station, catching his breath. Missy moved to close the emergency doors.

"Had a wee bit of trouble with the engines," she said, not sounding very apologetic. "I had to shut everything down. Where's that Neverperson?"

"Dead," said the Doctor. He pulled himself gingerly to his feet, brushing off his clothes. "Probably. Big blast of temporal energy, remember?"

"You're all right," objected Missy.

"I was lucky. The doors shielded me; Niall took the full brunt of the blast." He took out his sonic specs and scanned the room. "Dispersed beyond recovery."

"Just as well," said Missy. "Sooner or later he'd have attacked one of us and we'd have to kill him anyway."

The Doctor cleared his throat. "Never mind that. We need to get out of this universe. Not by this door; I've confirmed that much at least. Did you find anything useful?"

Missy shrugged. "You've seen the state of this ship."

"It's the only ship we have," said the Doctor. "Come on."

A few hours later, he had to admit defeat. This TARDIS was decayed beyond repair. Mired deep in the anti-time universe, it would never leave again on its own power. "It's become part of the local reality, where time doesn't exist properly. There is no longer any before or after between when this ship is here and when it isn't. It's been here forever and never at all."

"You came to this universe before, and left it again," Missy pointed out.

The Doctor ran his hands through his hair, finding the simple cause and effect of that disarrangement reassuring. "We're alive. We generate a sort of bubble of normal time, but this TARDIS is only a skeleton, a ghost of itself. The energy surges are part of the memory loop."

Missy frowned, but didn't dispute the Doctor's assessment. "Damn. That means we'll have to use my time ring."

"Time ring? What time ring? You could have said," the Doctor sputtered indignantly. "You had a time ring all along?"

"The one the CIA gave me. The one they can use to track and recall me, which is why I've been keeping it deactivated," said Missy. "It won't work in the anti-time universe, but if we're clever about hooking it into this rust bucket, it might provide enough kick to get us to Gallifrey."

The Doctor left the technical jiggery-pokery to Missy. He was finding it difficult to concentrate. Anti-time accumulated in his bones. In addition to the ambient contamination inside the broken TARDIS, he was draining it from Missy before it could affect her.

She shot him an insulted look when she noticed. "Don't you think I'm perfectly capable of handling it myself?"

"One of us has to keep a clear head. I'd rather it were me, but that ship's already sailed," said the Doctor. "This stuff's insidious. One moment you feel fine, the next we'll be rolling around trying to bash each other's brains out with rocks."
Missy shuddered. "Oh. Yes, I remember. Like that, is it?"

They had each suffered their share of being possessed by various malevolent entities and primal forces. It wouldn't do for both of them to succumb simultaneously. "Possibly. It's unpredictable."

"A shame I don't have the armor anymore," said Missy.

At her words, an image flashed through the Doctor's mind of Susan putting on the armor. He saw again the distant, lost expression on her face. The Doctor shook off the memory and the accompanying flare of guilt. "Yeah."

"What?"

"Nothing. Just get on with it."

The TARDIS punched a hole through a weak spot in the fabric of spacetime. That the weak spot was on Gallifrey itself was worrying, but the Doctor was grateful for the convenience of it. The time ring shot them through the hole and burnt itself out with the effort. Keeping his eyes shut to reduce external distractions, the Doctor twisted the loose threads of time and knotted them back together, sealing the hole again.

The Doctor opened his eyes a slit and saw Missy off to one side, scuffing a foot over the smoking crumbs of blackened metal hissing on the ground. She glanced at the Doctor. "You just can't get the workmanship these days."

"Huh," grunted the Doctor. He risked widening his focus. They were in a forest, light from two suns splattering down through the silvery leaves of trees like stone towers. And then his breath caught.

Light. Time. A tangle, twisted, wrong...

He gasped and covered his eyes with his elbow. He waved his free hand at Missy. "The music box. Use it. Take it off me..." He staggered back a step and bit back a curse. Zagreus, roiled by the passage between universes, was urging him to look, to pluck out the stunted timelines he could sense all around him and reveal the devastation that lay underneath. "I don't... Missy!"

"All right, all right." He didn't need to see to know when Missy began turning the crank on the music box. At the sudden weakness in his limbs, he collapsed against one of the trees. He could sense the particles of anti-time being drawn out from the wood and soil as well as his own flesh. When it was done, the Doctor took a deep breath. His face was still pressed against the tree trunk. "There's something wrong with these trees."

"They're trees," said Missy. She, too, inhaled deeply. "Atmospheric composition matches Gallifrey. It smells like summer."

"They're not moving," said the Doctor. It disturbed him. He traced a finger along the ridged bark.

"Are your wits still addled from the anti-time? Gallifreyan trees aren't known for their mobility," said Missy.

"Time!" The Doctor shoved himself away from the tree, spun in a wide circle, staring up at the silver canopy. "They're trapped in a single moment... we have to leave. Now." Without waiting for Missy, he sprinted away, heading down the slope.

She caught up with him where he stood at the edge of a trickle of a stream. "What the hell?"
The Doctor stared at the ripple of flowing water. "Couldn't you feel it? The forest was dead. Timelines eroded down to the roots. Petrified trees..."

"It did feel strange. I thought it was a side-effect of our breaking through from the anti-time universe," said Missy.

"It goes deeper than that. This may be Gallifrey, but it's a Gallifrey infested by anti-time," said the Doctor.

"We need to get to the Capitol," said Missy. She took a reading on her device. "We landed on the right continent, but that's about it. If we can't scrounge up a flyer or a transmat, we have a long walk ahead of us."

The Doctor nodded. He lifted his head and looked at her. "It's not a question of length, but of staying out of the bad patches. Come on."

"That was a scream!" The Doctor turned instinctively and hurried towards the sound.

They hadn't been walking for that long. During that time, Missy had been fiddling with her device, trying to pick up any local transmissions. Her failure to find anything comprehensible was not comforting to either of them. The only signals were distant and sporadic, cloaked under an unknown encryption.

"Let's hope they can talk as well as scream," said Missy.

The sound was not repeated. Either the screamer was dead, or... the Doctor quickened his steps even more.

On a rocky promontory above the stream they had been following, a woman was tied to a tree trunk. The tree was long dead, stripped bare of bark and broken off jaggedly just above the woman's height.

"A sacrifice?" muttered the Doctor. He slowed down, warily glancing around as he approached the woman.

"Or a goat," suggested Missy from behind him. He saw that she had slowed down even more, keeping her distance. She had the music box tucked under one arm, leaving the other arm free in case anyone needed disintegrating.

"More like that Kaled painter," said the Doctor, sensing the anti-time coming off the stranger in waves. He took another step closer and called out, "Hello?"

The woman turned to face the Doctor, and he saw that she had a strip of black cloth around her head, covering her eyes. She said in a hoarse croak, "Stay back!"

"It's all right," said the Doctor. "We don't mean any harm."

"Speak for yourself," interjected Missy. "I haven't decided yet."

"Hush," said the Doctor without turning around. He could see that the woman's timeline was hideously distorted, to the point where her face had no constant features, but slid from one possibility to another. Deformed shadows flaked from her with every twist of her body. "Who did this to you? Why?"
"I was chosen... chosen," said the woman. The words flickered in and out of focus. The language was Gallifreyan, but the accent sounded strange to the Doctor's ears. "To be... to become..."

"To become what?" asked the Doctor. He slid his sunglasses on, scanned her. A dark concentration of anti-time hung over her like a cloak, but underneath it, she had already suffered considerable temporal damage.

"...emissary of harmony. An unbending witness," said the woman. A sob choked her throat, and tears seeped out from under the blindfold. "I didn't know. I didn't know... the weight of it. Please... please help me."

The Doctor put away his sunglasses, then glanced at Missy.

Missy shrugged. "Someone went to the trouble of tying her to this tree. That's who I'd want to talk to."

"Yes, all right, but we can't leave her like this." The Doctor snatched the music box from Missy and activated it. A few moments later, the ropes flopped loosely to the ground, holding nothing except the tree trunk, which was etched more starkly than ever against the rock. The Doctor spent a long moment staring at the site, his fingers trembling as they gripped the music box. He barely noticed as Missy took it back from him. "Witness... she said 'witness'. I could almost see it... it shouldn't be possible."

"The war again," guessed Missy softly.


"Hmmm. Maybe," said Missy. "Here's a path. Come on, let's see where it goes."

The path led to a village, a village of caves dug out of a cliff-side. A series of small gardens had been cleared out of the surrounding forest, stretching from the bottom of the cliff. The "houses" were only reachable by wooden ladders that could be withdrawn at a moment's notice. As they were now. Open windows bristled with oddly primitive armaments.

"Strangers! Seize them!" The shout echoed off the cliff.

"Wait..." The Doctor tried to dodge away. Missy shot at the windows, but if she hit anyone, it had no discernible effect.

Egg-shaped missiles flew at them, bursting upon hitting the ground in a scattershot pattern all around them. Dark smoke billowed up, quickly enveloping them both. Time juddered and froze. Thin green filaments drifted down, wrapping them in sticky webs infused with anti-time.

The Doctor ripped himself free, absorbing the anti-time from the webs. He was about to grab Missy and escape when a wooden bolt hit him in the back. Instead of impaling him, it exploded into a burst of energy that stopped both his hearts. After that, everything went hazy.

He woke up to find himself lying on a rough stone floor, his head cradled in Missy's lap.

"Finally!" She shoved him away and slid back.

The back of the Doctor's head hit the floor with a thud. "Ugh." He winced and rubbed his skull. Then he noticed the coarse white cloth encasing his arm. "What is this? What am I wearing? What are you wearing?" He craned his neck up to squint at Missy, who had a similar white cloth draped
"Not my choice," said Missy. "They stripped us and wrapped us in these ridiculous sacks."

"Guh," said the Doctor, lying back down again. "Not bothering with the 'empty your pockets' rigmarole? Pity. I always like that bit."

"They didn't bother with handcuffs, either," said Missy. "Overconfident nit-wits."

"To be fair, they did capture us easily enough," said the Doctor. He sat up and looked around. Their prison was a bare, windowless room about two paces wide and three paces long, probably hollowed out of the cliff. The only light filtered in dimly from a grated vent in the ceiling.

Missy snorted. It went without saying that they had allowed themselves to be captured, both as a test of their opponents' capabilities and as a short-cut to pass through their outer walls and security.

The Doctor touched a palm against the stone floor. "This place is rotten with anti-time contamination. If those people live here, I wonder what it's done to them?"

"Nothing good, from what I saw of them," said Missy.

"Hmm." The Doctor lowered himself down and pressed an ear against the floor, closing his eyes in concentration. "I thought I heard... ah."

"What?"

"The walls are humming. Some sort of machinery. I don't know. The timelines are corrupted; the technology doesn't make sense."

"It must have diverged a long time ago from our past," said Missy. "Those chronon grenades had a home-made look to them. I wonder what the Capitol is like, if even the villagers are armed to the teeth."

"They were careful to take us alive. They've done this before," said the Doctor, sitting up again. "Perhaps we should make a discreet exit. How's the door?"

"Heavy," said Missy. She tried the handle. "What's that trick you used to use on doors? Never mind. The lock is metal, but the door is wood. I can always break wood."

She winked at the Doctor, then lightly slapped the door. It splintered into two pieces. She pushed them apart, then stepped through. "Come on."

"How did you --- " The Doctor hurried to catch up. On a sudden suspicion, he reached for her hand and examined her fingers. They smelled faintly of freshly shaved wood and the long nails were wickedly sharp. Reinforced with some kind of high-tech assassin's nail polish, he realized. Likely toxic, on top of its corrosive properties. She must have already cut through the door while he was unconscious. "Very clever."

"No guards," said Missy, sounding disappointed. She looked up and down the corridor outside their cell. Globes fixed to the ceiling at regular intervals cast a feeble light over them. The air carried a whiff of something rank. There were a handful of other doors, but they hung ajar, all revealing empty interiors. "Amateurs."

"Wait. Listen." A distant whuffle reached their ears, followed by the sound of something heavy dragging itself closer. "I think they have a pet monster."
It should have been too big to fit inside the narrow corridor, but it carried its own space with it. It reminded the Doctor of a Gallifreyan badger, except ten times the normal size and fizzing with anti-time. With unnatural speed, it closed in on the Doctor, jaws snapping and claws ready to rend him to shreds.

The Doctor ducked under the creature and slid inside its reach, wrestling its claws and teeth away from his face. He instinctively drew out the anti-time contamination, causing the monster's space to collapse and its timeline to wither. He was vaguely aware of Missy behind him, delivering the finishing blow. The Doctor crawled out from under the twitching corpse, wiping the spray of blood from his face with a crude sleeve. Somehow Missy had avoided being splattered. Only a delicate smear of blood on her fingers betrayed her flurry of violence.

"What a brute," said Missy. "I prefer something more playful."

The Doctor edged his way around the dead creature. "Come on. Before we attract any more attention."

But it was too late. Someone had raised the alarm. Bells clanged all through the cliff-side village.

Outnumbered and empty-handed as they were, the Doctor and Missy were captured again. This time, their hands were secured around their backs with rope. Nooses wrapped around their necks, each with two lead lines attached. They were not returned to the cell, but rather led through the labyrinthine passages of the village.

Their captors looked Gallifreyan at first glance, but their timelines were scarred. The Doctor had the impression that some of them flickered in and out of existence when no one was looking at them. To his surprise, they were not nearly as tainted by anti-time as the overgrown badger had been.

"Where are you taking us?" he asked.

One of them answered, "The Purifier will deal with you."

The Doctor exchanged a puzzled glance with Missy. Purifier?

The one they called the "Purifier" presided over an improbably large chamber in the heart of the cliff-side village. He was a withered old man sitting --- no, not merely sitting --- plugged, realized the Doctor, plugged into a chair that half-encased him, with cables snaking up into sockets in his skull. His eyes were hidden behind thick crystalline lens that glinted with a hint of anti-time.

The second most prominent feature of the chamber was a glass sphere half-sunk into the floor. It was fitted with a single rectangular hatch and looked big enough to hold a dozen people. Currently, it held nothing except a thick layer of dust. One of the villagers, a youth in a brown smock and carrying a broom, scurried in, opening the hatch and sweeping up the dust.

The Purifier ignored the sweeper, focusing his glinting crystalline gaze on the Doctor and Missy. He spoke in a dry, whispering voice, "Strangers. Of what village?"

One of their captors stood forward, bowing. She answered, "They bear no mark that we can read, my lord. Their clothing is unknown to us. They carried strange, unclean items."

"How far must you have traveled? Leaving all kin behind." The Purifier cackled, a thin rattle of a laugh. "Here your journey ends. But be assured it was not wasted. Your time, extracted and purified, will be used to sustain the People."
The Doctor had heard enough to guess at the purpose of the unfamiliar equipment set up in the room. Time and anti-time were squeezed out from anything and anyone placed inside the glass sphere, separated out. The purified time would be administered to the villagers, preserving their lives, while the concentrated anti-time was gathered up. And dumped onto a designated sacrifice, thought the Doctor, remembering the woman tied to the tree.

But not all of it. The Doctor could sense the fizz of anti-time running through the equipment, channeled under the floor and through the walls. The Purifier was linked to it through his chair, controlling it. To what purpose? The Doctor didn't know, yet. It must be important to be worth the risk of erosion to the local timelines.

The boy in the brown smock had returned, this time lugging a wicker basket into the glass sphere. The purple fabric of Missy's dress was visible on top of the contents. All their clothes and belongings, thought the Doctor, making a note to retrieve the basket before they escaped. He didn't want to be running through the forest in bare feet.

"Place them inside the Sieve," ordered the Purifier.

The Doctor shut his eyes, letting himself be shoved forward. Now. It would have to be now. He reached for the anti-time snaking under the floor and pulled. The inrush overwhelmed him for a moment. As he struggled to balance the chaotic currents in his mind, he was aware without looking that Missy had already freed herself from the ropes binding her. Their guards were doomed, though they didn't know it yet.

The Purifier writhed in his chair, the threads of anti-time dragged loose from his body, the threads that were keeping him alive.

Ghoul, thought the Doctor viciously. Ghouls and cannibals. He had a fleeting surge of regret for the children, too young to understand the murders committed in their name, but he could not stop what he had begun. All the anti-time flowed inexorably towards him.

The village will fall.

Fall? The Doctor's legs felt suddenly shaky. No. Not his legs. The ground. A rumbling roar rattled his teeth.

"Earthquake," said Missy, grabbing him by the arm. "Run!"

He ran.

Moments later, they emerged from the cliff, slithering down a ladder in a cloud of dust. This time, the Doctor (or Zagreus) held off the collapse until he was clear. The villagers were not so lucky. The ones that weren't crushed under rocks and rubble were swept away on the time winds stirred up by the sudden exodus of anti-time. The Doctor and Missy didn't stop running until they reached the trees that marked the edge of the village.

"Crude but effective, this earthquake of yours," said Missy. "I think you killed them all."

"'s not my... not my earthquake," said the Doctor, turning around to look at the crumbled slope of dirt and scree where the village had been. His whole body was shaking and his teeth chattering from the effort to rein in the anti-time he had collected. "The earthquake happened years ago. The so-called Purifier was using anti-time to hold it back."

"Whatever," said Missy. "Here, I saved these for you." She tossed an armful of clothes at the Doctor, followed by his shoes.
The Doctor made no move to catch them, letting them slide off his torso onto the dirt. He crumpled to his knees a moment later, staring blankly with his fists clenched at his sides. He was aware of Missy changing her own clothes and checking her device, but didn't react even when a quick blast reduced a pebble to dust right next to him. He was too preoccupied with trying to remember who he was.

This is my world now, said Zagreus inside his mind. You have no place here.

That couldn't be true. Could it? A slap across the back of his head startled him from his trance.

"Wake up, Doctor. Places to go, people to see."

"I am NOT the Doctor!" he insisted. Then his thoughts cleared. He bent over, eyes shut, clutching his arms around himself as if to keep the anti-time from escaping. "The box. Use it, before I lose myself again."

But this time, he waited in vain for Missy to trigger the decontamination process. Instead, he felt something cold and metallic settle over his head. Sharp pain pierced his skull. He groped at it with fingers that kept slipping away. He realized fuzzily that the thing, a thin circlet of some kind, must be forged from the same anti-time resistant material as the music box. "What... what have you done?"

The circlet seemed to tighten on his head. The Doctor collapsed to the ground, rolling in agony.

Missy laughed. She enunciated slowly and clearly, "I am the Mistress and you will obey me." Then she laughed some more.

The Doctor could only listen, helpless to resist.
"The most destructive power in the whole of creation." --- the Doctor (Zagreus)

Chapter Summary

Sometimes you win, and sometimes you're just a mutant pig-rat with your neck in the snare.

"I am the Mistress and you will obey me."

The Doctor struggled to speak, forcing words past his gasps of pain. "Nothing wrong... with... a catchphrase. Love... a good catchphrase. But... why... why... in... Sanskrit?"

"I was bored with ancient Greek. I was planning to move on to Asian mythology when you crashed in on me," said Missy. "Then I was busy with the war and everything else afterwards, but our nostalgia tour in my music box brought it all back. How's your head? Get your thoughts back together yet?"

The Doctor rolled over onto his back and stared up at the sky. He actually was feeling more clear-headed now. He wanted to laugh when he realized. Zagreus had a lower pain tolerance than the Doctor. He could dish it out, but couldn't take it, so he had retreated to a dark corner of the Doctor's mindscape.

"Exactly," said Missy, as if she could hear his thoughts. Which she probably could. "You remember I had a line on control bracelets? I made one for my niece Iris, the one who was hosting the Nyx. Sadly flawed, since she got out of it somehow. This is the updated version."

The Doctor would have preferred a bracelet. A crown was too ostentatious. Maybe he could wear a hat. Did they have hats in this corrupted version of Gallifrey?

"Your vanity will be the death of us. It had to go around your thick skull, in order to implant the neural links." Missy reached out a hand and pulled him to his feet. The incapacitating pain vanished as quickly as it had come. She pointed her device at him and took some readings.

The Doctor shivered, wrapping his arms around himself. The concentration of anti-time made him queasy. How long had she been planning this? He remembered the session with her umbrella-shaped pain inducer. In hindsight, it was clear that she had been running tests on him, calibrating her instruments. "This is insanely risky. Anti-time is intrinsically inimical to normal time."

"Nonsense," said Missy. "It's simply a matter of creating a stable interface. We know it's possible. How did you survive that massive anti-time explosion back in your eighth life?"

"Rassilon... manipulated things," muttered the Doctor.

"There you go, then. He turned you into a... hybrid." Missy grinned. "Thick of him not to notice."

"I don't want to talk about it." He didn't even want to think about it. He distracted himself with putting his own clothes back on. He patted at his pockets, checking that the contents were intact.
Missy summoned him to help her with her corset again. "Of course, I've improved on Rassilon's work."

"I hate this thing," said the Doctor as he wrestled with the laces.

"So change it," said Missy. She sent the order along the link, and the Doctor found himself complying.

It took only a slight shift to replace this timeline with one in which Missy wore a twenty-sixth century version of her garments. They looked the same as before, but were much lower-maintenance. She slipped the music box into a dimensionally transcendental pocket, where it vanished without trace.

"Sweet," approved Missy. She took another reading with her device. "Saves us on laundry bills if nothing else."

"The most destructive power in creation, and you want to use it to play dress-up?" grumbled the Doctor. Zagreus snarled in the back of his mind, but a flick of Missy's metaphorical whip kept him cowed for the moment.

"Just a test before we try anything major," said Missy. She snapped her fingers. "Let's go. The Capitol awaits. If you collect all the anti-time along the way, we should be unstoppable by the time we arrive."

"'Major'? What 'major' thing did you have in mind?" The Doctor followed her, having no choice in the matter.

"Guess!" said Missy cheerfully. She strolled through the woods, down to the banks of the stream, then followed its course, as casually as someone out on a day hike. After awhile, she began singing in Mandarin, "You shoulder the carrying pole, I'll lead the horse..."

The Doctor listened in glum silence as she continued, recognizing the song from a twentieth century television series. She had always been fond of that era of human entertainment, especially the children's shows.

"Ask where is the road? The road is under your feet," she concluded, with a bounce in her step.

The Doctor sighed, fidgeting again with the circlet he couldn't remove. If anyone was the Monkey King, it was her. Who turned heaven (or the Capitol, which amounted to the same thing as far as the Time Lords were concerned) upside down in a mad search for immortality? Who got themselves burnt to a crisp and came out strengthened? Who slaughtered thousands without blinking an eye?

"You're lying to yourself again, Doctor," said Missy without turning around. "You're responsible for as much chaos as I am."

The Doctor shook his head. He didn't... he wasn't like that. He refused to be like that. On the other hand, if he wasn't the Monkey, did that make him the Pig? Pig, who was called the Idiot. What a thought.

Missy laughed. "Of course you're Pig. No detachment, none. You with your human companions, and your blind devotion to reality as you know it. You'll never achieve enlightenment until you learn to let go."

The Doctor had once known how to let go of things, of people. Or was it abandonment? He thought of Susan. How well had that turned out? Then the Time War had changed him. Afterwards, he had
been unwilling to let anyone go until circumstances forced his hand. And he had held on to Clara for
too long, too tightly, resulting in their current predicament.

Damned if you do, damned if you don't.

Missy stopped, turning to face him. "You just need to learn to take matters into your own hands."
She made a throat-slitting gesture. "When relationships have come to a natural end, it's better to leave
with a beautiful memory. Don't let old entanglements strangle future possibilities."

The Doctor shot her a disgusted look. "And much of the universe would love to apply that to you."

Missy waved her hand dismissively. "Let them try!"

The Doctor vowed silently to give it a try himself, as soon as he freed himself from the control
circl. It was only a technological device. Once he figured out the details, he would be able to get
around it. He only hoped he could manage it before Missy forced him into something unforgivable.
His fingers curled around the sonic screwdriver. If he could program it, maybe while Missy was
sleeping...

"Oh, darling, you'll have to do better than that," said Missy. As it turned out, she held enough control
over his consciousness to force him to sleep at her will.

He woke up in the morning to a sore back and the smell of burnt fish. Missy handed him a leafy
bundle. He opened it to find a pair of cooked white eyes gaping back at him accusingly. "Ah." She
must have zapped it with her device.

"Can your sonic screwdriver cook fish? I didn't think so," said Missy smugly. "Well, go on, I know
you're hungry."

The Doctor was in fact ravenous. He hadn't eaten in years. So. Fish. He used to like fish sticks, didn't
he? This was the same, bar a bit of breading and seasoning. It wasn't even contaminated with anti-
time. He took a bite, then plucked the bones from his mouth and threw them aside. "Eh. Could use
some salt."

They continued onwards. About mid-morning, Missy's device detected signs of another village. This
time they approached it with more caution. They found a vantage point on the cliff-top on the
opposite side and observed the village from hiding. It was dug out of the rocks in the same style as
the other village, with a wooden wall around the gardens. Just as before, the visible cliff-side
openings bristled with armaments.

They watched the villagers for awhile. Most stayed within the walls, though a few ventured out into
the forest. Hunters and gatherers, guessed the Doctor. Not enough for a raiding party. The Doctor
scanned them through his sonic sunglasses and found the people, like their village, warped by anti-
time.

"I bet they're still in range of that earthquake," said Missy softly. "What do you think?"

"No," said the Doctor. "Missy --- "

"Why not? They're obviously just as bad as that other lot." She touched his arm. "They're all dead
already."

The Doctor tensed, knowing that she could force him. Don't, please don't, he thought. They're our
people. They can't help what they've become.
Missy's hand slipped away. "It doesn't matter. Let's go."

The Doctor breathed again in relief. He nodded and followed as she led them away deeper into the sparse woods away from the edge of the cliff. After a day and a half, he was getting used to walking around with anti-time haunting every particle of his being. The threat of the circlet kept his thoughts more or less coherent, with only a few random destructive urges making it to his conscious mind.

They saw little in the way of wildlife, though they could hear the occasional bird piping against the background hiss of insects, interspersed with the rustle of things moving through the layer of fallen leaves that covered the ground. The Doctor was quiet, trying to think as little as possible, speaking up only to stop Missy from walking into the patches of corroded time that welled up here and there like hidden springs, seeping anti-time into the surroundings.

"It can't be that bad," said Missy. "The planet is still here, still capable of supporting life."

"Huh," grunted the Doctor. He collected what he could of the anti-time and sealed up any holes he found, but it was like trying to clean up the ocean by picking up individual pieces of litter along the beach.

They came across an animal trap which gave them pause. Likely set by one of the semi-savage villagers, it was a wire snare which now held a pig-rat. Missy poked at it with a stick. It responded with an oozing deformation of its shape. Paws jerked and clawed at the ground, but the creature was unable to escape the wire looped tight around its neck.

"Interesting," said Missy. "It's dead and not dead. It must be using anti-time to keep its quantum state from collapsing."

"That's evolution for you," said the Doctor. "Things adapt, no matter the circumstances."

"Futile, in this case. The trapper will still kill it."

"Maybe some of them will evolve methods to slip free," said the Doctor.

Missy snorted. "Just what we need: a plague of slippery pig-rats capable of manipulating anti-time."

She prodded the Doctor's back with the stick when he lingered too long, gazing sadly down at the struggling pig-rat. "Don't waste your sympathy on vermin. Walk!"

"I'm walking, I'm walking," said the Doctor. Behind him, the snare was empty. Missy didn't comment. They continued walking for the rest of the day, and the next day after that. By mutual agreement, they avoided contact with any of the Gallifreyans, making wide detours around their villages.

On the fourth evening, they reached the edge of the lowlands. Rust-colored plains stretched out seemingly endlessly between them and the Capitol. Glittering trees traced out the meandering lines of a river and its tributaries. If anything, the anti-time corrosion was worse there than in the hills, as the Doctor determined with a quick scan through his sonic sunglasses.

"I don't like it," said the Doctor as the darkness of full-night crept over them. The glow of artificial lighting betrayed the locations of the settlements. Other areas were unnaturally shadowed, so dark as to almost not be there.

"Nothing moving in the air. No motorized vehicles of any kind," said Missy, peering through her binoculars. "At a guess, they're isolationist, primitive, and hostile."
The Doctor didn't dispute her assessment, given what they had already seen. Except --- it wouldn't do to underestimate them. The Gallifreyans of their own reality had a similar tendency to live simply, while under the surface lay forgotten, yet massively powerful, technology.

"Our people are dreadfully boring in every possible timeline, you mean? God, how depressing."

The Doctor wished she would stop eavesdropping.

"Safer this way for both of us, Doctor Zagreus."

And don't call me that, he thought. What Zagreus thought, the Doctor didn't know and didn't want to know.

The next morning, the Doctor and Missy stared out at the plains, unhappy with what they saw. Everything looked different under the sunlight, but it was more than the change in illumination. The pattern of the waterways and the location of the settlements had shifted, the Doctor would swear to that, but he couldn't remember what the changes had been.

"Bad dreams?" Missy asked from beside him.

The Doctor nodded. "Yeah."

She squeezed his arm and pulled him out of his reverie. "Come on."

They picked their way down into the lowlands. It wasn't as flat as it appeared from above. They trudged on, trusting to their sense of direction to avoid walking in circles. The sky was clear and bright overhead. There was no way they could have predicted the time storm.

Reality tilted.

They were flung off the edge of the world into the crevasse that opened between timelines. Time winds howled all around them. The Doctor shut his eyes against the confusion of images from conflicting versions of Gallifrey that assaulted him. Then all the images fell to pieces, dissolving into nothing. The crevasse snapped shut. There was only darkness left. Nothing. No time, no space.

They were in the void between universes.

The Doctor had instinctively used anti-time to construct a bubble of space around himself and Missy, who held onto his left wrist with an iron grip.

Get us out of here, came her mental command, tinged with panic.

There's nowhere to go, thought the Doctor. There's nothing. Only the void.

Find something!

There isn't anything, protested the Doctor. Then he doubled over in pain, a loop of fire twisting around his thoughts.

Find. Something. Missy punctuated the words with a tightening of the control circuit before releasing her mental vise.

All right. All right. The Doctor gritted his teeth, allowing a fragment of Zagreus to surface. Through the anti-time entity's vision, he could see... something. Before Zagreus could take over his mind completely, the Doctor wrenched himself and Missy to that flickering echo of reality.
"It's one of the CIA's space stations," said Missy when their surroundings had acquired enough substance for her to identify. "This one..." She sniffed the air and tested her weight. "Temporal experiments during the war."

"Flotsam and jetsam in the void, cut off from a defunct reality." The Doctor rapped his knuckles against the metal panels of the wall, listening to the sound. "But solid enough for all that. I wonder if there are any survivors."

"Let's find out," said Missy. She set off down a corridor, lights turning themselves on in her wake. "The automatic systems are still functional."

"Temporal experiments? Maybe there'll be some useful equipment," said the Doctor. But they found the laboratories stripped down to bare essentials, with the computer records wiped. The Doctor scowled at the log. "Level eight sanitation protocol initiated...and completed." He slapped the console in frustration. "No reasons given. Typical CIA paranoia."

"So something went wrong," Missy shrugged. "Happened all the time, during the war. That's probably why the station is here, rather than orbiting Gallifrey or blown to bits. You should be grateful."

"But what happened to the personnel?"

They made a full circuit of the station without finding anyone. Except ---

"We're not alone here," said the Doctor.

Missy frowned at the display on her device. "I'm not picking up any other life signs."

"We're not alone," insisted the Doctor. He glanced quickly over his shoulder, then resolutely held his gaze forward. "Keep walking."

After the second circuit of the station, Missy's impatience with the Doctor's irrationality had given way to uncertainty. "Ghosts?"

"I don't know. Keep walking."

On their third circuit, when they walked into the dining hall, the previously deserted tables and chairs were packed with a silent, staring crowd. Their appearance shifted between possibilities in a dizzying fluctuation. The Doctor had the impression that only a moment before, the place had been noisy with the clamor of a dozen conversations.

"Hello, that's different," said Missy, stopping short as she came up beside the Doctor.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," started the Doctor, clasping his hands together in front of his chest. "Perhaps you're wondering why I've gathered you all here..." When that met with no reaction, the Doctor finished awkwardly, "Actually, I'm wondering that, too. Who are you and what are you doing here?"

At this, one of the crowd stood up. He slapped his mug *thump* onto his table. "Same as you, I expect. Blown in on the time winds with nowhere else to go. You look like old-timers to me. Who are you?"

"I'm the Doctor, and this is the Mistress," said the Doctor, gesturing at Missy.

"The Doctor?" The shocked whispers rustled through the crowd. "And surely he means the Master.
Both of them?

"Renegades," said their spokesman. He looked like he wanted to spit. "Why are you here? You running from the war?"

The murmuring crowd diverged on this point, between "...here to save us..." and "...here to destroy us. Always hated us..."

The Doctor and Missy exchanged a glance. Then the Doctor said, "We're not really planning to stay long."

"Plans! What are your plans worth here? We're nowhere, we're nothing, and so are you."

"Something is sustaining you," said Missy. She scanned the room with her device and studied the results.

The murmurs converged into a fearful, "The Stationmaster. Take them to the Stationmaster..."

"You must save us," said the Stationmaster. His true name had been worn away long ago, and now he had only blank crystalline orbs to turn towards the two visitors. He was awash with anti-time, in a way now all too familiar to the Doctor.

"Must we?" said the Doctor.

"For the sake of all the universe," said the Stationmaster portentously.

"I hate when people say things like that," remarked Missy in an aside to the Doctor. "You being you, you must hear it all the time."

"Now and then," said the Doctor. "It's never actually helpful."

"You two are the only ones left," said the Stationmaster. "I am an Unbending Witness, and I have seen the end of time..."

"And through your vision, you brought this space station and those poor strays out there into... this tentative existence," said the Doctor. He had gathered that much from the Stationmaster's cryptic explanations. Somehow, as an Unbending Witness, he managed to exist in multiple realities simultaneously. The Time War burned eternally in his mind's eye, a sight that made him blind to ordinary light.

"You must help us."

"I don't suppose you have a TARDIS tucked away somewhere? No?" The Doctor looked at Missy, then back at the Stationmaster. "Then we'll need some time to think about it."

They were assigned two individual rooms in the station's living quarters, but Missy followed the Doctor into his room, then shut the door behind her. "Those half-ghosts give me the creeps."

"They can't help having mangled timelines." The Doctor sat down on the bed, touching it gingerly. "A real bed, with real sheets. Or at least as real as anything can be in the void. The very lap of luxury, wouldn't you say?"

Missy joined him on the bed, flinging an arm around his shoulders. She leaned closer and said, "I say we should celebrate."
"Celebrate? Celebrate... what?" He was trying not to think what he was thinking, but she was right there next to him and he couldn't help it, even though it was a stupid idea because what if those ghost people were plotting something, but so what, they could cope, and...

"This is the longest we've been together since we left Gallifrey," said Missy, interrupting his scrambled thoughts.

"But we spent most of that time chanting equations," protested the Doctor. "Hardly an extended romantic interlude..."

"Doesn't matter," said Missy. And it didn't, not really.

Naturally, the Doctor ended up on the floor curled into a fetal position, clutching his head and biting back cries of agony.

"I told you to keep your hands off my timeline!" snarled Missy from the bed above him.

Some time later, the Doctor crawled back into the bed and pulled a blanket over his head, which was still throbbing. He said, his voice muffled under the cloth, "It wasn't me. It was Zagreus."

Missy hit him with a pillow. "Stop wishing me to be something I'm not!" She hit him again, and he conceded the point, at least mentally.

The Doctor did what he could to patch the timelines of the half-ghosts, stabilizing their existence and drawing the anti-time taint from them. However, they were still trapped in a state of uncertain reality and lost in the void.

Missy had an idea about that which involved hooking the Doctor into the transmat.

"We're out of transmat range of everything that ever existed," said the Doctor.

"Shhhh," said Missy. "If that Stationmaster can see past the void, so can you."

"All he sees is the damned war," said the Doctor. He double-checked the connections, in case she intended to burn him up in order to power some improbable inter-universe teleport.

"Trust me, dear," said Missy, patting his cheek. "Besides, I'll need you later."

The Doctor groaned. Another one of her plans. But that could wait until they were out of here.

"Don't forget us," pleaded their audience of half-ghosts, the spectators that the Doctor had been trying to ignore. "Don't abandon us."

The Doctor gave them what he hoped was a reassuring smile, but suspected was more of a nervous grimace. Then Missy flicked a switch, and his consciousness scattered like leaves in a whirlwind.

Sight returned first. The Doctor recognized the drab columns and dark corners typical of the sub-basement levels of the Capitol. Missy nodded, saying something that he couldn't hear. Then she tensed, grabbing his wrist in alarm and staring over his shoulder.

Hearing returned. And he heard...

...the unmistakeable low, pulsing hum of...
"IN-TRU-DERS! ALERT! IN-TRU-DERS!" The grating voices filled the space, echoing off the walls.

...a Dalek city.

He whirled, seeing three of the loathsome creatures skimming across the floor towards them, inscrutable behind their armor casing, gunsticks aimed and primed.

"IN-TRU-DERS WILL I-DEN-TI-FY THEM-SELVES. YOU WILL AN-SWER! I-DEN-TI-FY!"
"As hard as I try, I'm just not one of you." --- Kenzi (Turn to Stone)

Chapter Summary

"The Time War and me" by Ushas, age 1100-something

EXTERMINATE!

Bo woke in a wash of terror, her heart pounding, still hearing the distorted, mechanical voices screeching for her destruction, still seeing the image of an alien machine gliding inexorably closer. Though the giant pepper-pot should by rights be a laughable monster compared to everything she had faced in recent years, it aroused a deep, unreasoning fear.

Then Bo heard Lauren whimpering in her sleep. She reached out a hand to comfort her lover and found her skin cold and clammy to the touch. The shock woke Bo enough to remember that it was the Rani: not Lauren, and not human. It was the Rani's nightmares that must have leaked into Bo's subconscious. Gallifreyans were telepathic; the Rani had told her that. The mind-link added a new dimension to their sex life, one which Bo found amazing. But then came times like this, when fear threatened to feed back on itself and grow into full-fledged panic.

The Rani had taught Bo mental exercises, which she now used to calm her own thoughts before reaching again for the Rani. Bo held her in her arms, soothing her, falling asleep again while listening to her breathing grow even again.

A few hours later, Bo woke up to find herself alone in bed. Sunlight slanted in through the bottom of the windows (the Rani insisted on keeping the blinds drawn up a few inches.) It was Saturday, so the Rani had no commitments to the lab today. Then Bo caught the scent of cooking, and she realized where the Rani must be.

Bo arrived in the kitchen to find the Rani still busy at the stove. "Hey, smells good." She saw slices of apples and oranges already laid out, along with potato pancakes of some kind. Something sizzled in the frying pan. Bo peered around the Rani to see some kind of fancy omelette with bits of greenery sprinkled in it.

The Rani concentrated on the omelette. "It's a skyash diavika. I had to substitute local ingredients, but I think I've captured the essential structure. The proteins in chicken eggs have a tendency to denature prematurely, but I've compensated by..." She rattled off a technical explanation that Bo didn't even try to decipher.

The Rani didn't mention anything about her nightmares, but Bo remembered Lauren's stress baking (complete with nerdly commentary). She smiled to find that at least that hadn't changed. She poured herself a cup of coffee from the machine. "Is that a Gallifreyan dish?"

"No," said the Rani. She didn't elaborate. A few minutes later, she divided the omelette onto two plates. She set them both onto the table and sat down with her own cup of coffee.

Bo sat in the chair across from her. "So... are you ok?"

"I'm fine."
They ate breakfast, ignoring the awkward silences that stretched between them. Bo was relieved when the conversation they weren't having was interrupted by the doorbell.

"I'll get that," said Bo hastily.

"Hey, Sis." It was Dagny. Not waiting for an invitation, she barged inside past Bo and headed for the kitchen, where she helped herself to a generous serving of breakfast. "Hey, Doc. You're needed at the clinic."

"It's Saturday," protested Bo. She and the Rani had turned off their phones last night, planning on enjoying the day together, or at least most of the morning. So much for plans.

"I know, that's why I came out in person, to make sure she drags her lazy ass over there," said Dagny. She shoved a forkful of potato pancake into her mouth.

"Hey!" But Bo understood where she was coming from. In the last few months since the Rani had recovered her identity, she had spent less time at the clinic and more time alone, pursuing errands of her own with no explanation to anyone. Though it might have been simpler to quit her job, the Rani insisted on maintaining her cover as Dr. Lauren Lewis, saying that she didn't want any more trouble with the fae than she had already suffered as a rebellious human.

"It's all right," said the Rani, looking over at Dagny. "What's happened?"

The patient (some kind of Egyptian fae according to Dagny) was alive but unconscious. After examining the various scan results, the Rani suspected poison. Her lab techs had already collected blood and urine samples. Now she prepared a series of new tests to run.

Bo and Dagny watched her through the window from the corridor outside. The Rani ignored them both.

Dagny nudged Bo in the ribs and murmured, "Trouble in paradise?"

"Shut up," said Bo, swatting her sister's hand away. "So do we have a case?"

"Yeah. Dyson asked for you, because the victim is a Dark Fae." Dyson's history as a Light Fae enforcer meant that few Dark Fae were willing to talk to him. "I told him he could just send me. I mean, Unaligned Valkyrie, hello? But nooo... I guess I'm just not good enough."

"It's not that," said Bo, knowing that Dagny was still feeling insecure despite having recently developed her full Valkyrie powers. She knew things without having explicitly learned them, but understanding came more slowly. "Yes, you can do a mean skull-face, and you kick ass in the sparring ring, but real experience is something that takes time. Anyway, everyone needs a backup. When I started this fae investigator business, I had Kenzi."

Dagny rolled her eyes. "Riiight, how could I forget Kenzi the wonder-human!"

"She raised you and managed not to kill you. That's what I call a superpower." Bo suppressed her irritation. Ok, maybe she had mentioned Kenzi a few times since Dagny had become Bo's junior partner, but she hadn't meant to compare them. She just missed her old friend. She stared through the window at the Rani, who was now hunched over a microscope, and wondered what Kenzi would say about their current situation.

"So? Are we investigating or what?" asked Dagny.
"Yes, but I want to know what we're walking into. Wait and see what Lauren has to report," said Bo. "What do you have so far on the victim?"

"Check your phone. I sent you an email ages ago."

"Right, sorry." Bo admonished herself to concentrate and not let personal issues distract her. She took out her phone and read through the messages.

"Neonicotinoids," was the Rani's verdict. "And see these marks on the patient's skin? Injection sites, but the injector was organic, not metal. There's no swelling, due to the way the patient's immune system works..."

"What are we looking for?" asked Bo when the Rani finished her summary. "Another fae?"

"Bees, wasps, hornets, something along those lines. I don't know what kind of fae, but if you track the patient's movements from the past three days, you'll find out. Record whatever you can, even if you don't get a definite ID," said the Rani. "I'll add it to the database."

Bo nodded. The Rani had written an app for identifying fae types. It lacked the ritualistic gravitas of Trick consulting his beloved fae lore books, but a smartphone app was definitely faster and easier to use. She glanced at the patient. "Can you save him?"

"Of course," said the Rani, barely even looking at Bo.

"Are humans in danger?" Once upon a time, Bo would not have needed to ask. If Lauren... Bo cut off that line of thought.

"The patient is a Khepri, that is, a scarab fae. Despite his outward appearance, his metabolism is more insectoid than mammalian. So your humans are probably safe, as are you two, most likely."

The Rani paused to consider, then said, "Although, to be on the safe side, you should wear protective coveralls and hoods. They're in the supply room in section E-5."

"Turn right at the next light," said Dagny, consulting her phone for directions to the patient's home. "Seriously, are you two ok? You know I'm here for you, right?"

"I know, and I appreciate it. But..." Bo shook her head, unsure what to say or how to explain the gradually increasing distance between them. The Rani's nightmares were not something Bo could discuss with other people.

"You wish Kenzi was here instead, right?" Dagny sighed.

"Don't start," said Bo. "It's hard to explain. You never had the chance to know Lauren when she was human."

"But isn't this better? I thought you said she once tried to turn herself into a fae so she wouldn't, like, die of old age on you," said Dagny. "I mean, I'm not sure what you see in her, but hey, whatever. Now you can be together for centuries."

"But I'm not sure she wants to, anymore. Sometimes I think this world is like a cage for her. That I'm a cage. And I never wanted to keep her prisoner," said Bo. "There's been too much of that already in our family."

"You still love each other, don't you?" asked Dagny.
"That just makes it worse," said Bo. "Forget it. We're here." She pulled into a driveway.

"Thriae," Bo reported to the Rani, a few days later. The case had turned out to be straightforward. "Bee nymphs. They're sort of a group mind, only this one was going insane because so many of the hive had been poisoned by insecticides. They were trying to expel the poison. The Khepri was hiking in their territory and got stung..."

The Rani nodded. "I suspected it might be something along those lines. I've developed a retrogenetic treatment that can protect them. However, if they propagate the resistance into the wider population, I can't answer for the effects on human agriculture."

"Leave that to their scientists. As long as you can save these people..." said Bo.

"That much is simple enough." The Rani tweaked her cure to account for the latest data from Bo, then applied it to the stricken fae. It worked perfectly. Their gratitude brought a smile to the Rani's face for the first time in weeks, but it didn't last long.

On an impulse, Bo decided to revitalize their relationship with a romantic dinner ("to celebrate your success!") on the rooftop terrace of a Japanese restaurant. Despite having been selected for its ambience rather than its authenticity, the place turned out to serve excellent sashimi. Bo and the Rani shared a bottle of sake, even though the Rani claimed that alcohol had little effect on Gallifreyans.

"It's not that different from the food I remember from childhood," said the Rani, gesturing with the piece of salmon in her chopsticks. "Convergent evolution is a thing, especially with piscine lifeforms."

"Oh. Good." Bo tilted her head back and squinted at the sky. As it was summer, the sky had barely begun to darken even at this late hour. "So come on, show me which one is your home planet? Star? Whatever..."

The Rani followed her gaze. "Well, if we could see it through all the light pollution..." She pointed. "About there. But we're not even in the right universe."

"And that's a good thing, right?" Oh god, now she sounded like Dagny. Bo poured more sake into the little round cup. Was this the second bottle? "'Cause there's a war going on and you're like a refugee..."

"Close enough," said the Rani. They ate in silence for awhile. "You know, I had a planet once. Not Gallifrey. My own planet..."

"A whole planet? Cool," said Bo. "And a bit scary. But I'm not judging." Bo had gone through her own Dark Queen phase, after all. Not once had Lauren been anything but supportive.

"It was called Miasimia Goria. No intelligent life when I arrived. I augmented the most promising species myself, using a human template," said the Rani. "Short generations, adaptable, and robust. Of course, I improved on the basic model. Advanced intelligence, temporal sensitivity, and so on."

"What happened?" Rice wine or no rice wine, Bo was still sober enough to notice the Rani's use of the past tense in describing her planet.

"The Daleks."

Well, that was a conversation-killer, thought Bo after five minutes of awkward silence.
"I knew they were coming to that sector of space," said the Rani a few cups of wine later. The faint flickers of lamp-light left her face obscured and rendered her shape into a dim silhouette, but her voice was steeped with regrets. "By then, I had left Miasimia Goria to develop on its own, but I came back. I tried to prepare my people. More technology. More augmentation."

"And then the Daleks attacked?" Bo knew that the monsters from her nightmares were called "Daleks", but this was the first time the Rani had revealed any details of the war.

"They overwhelmed us. Their weapons were beyond anything I'd ever seen from them before. Miasimia Goria burned. Stripped of resources, it's nothing but a dead cinder now." The Rani lowered her head, tilting her cup between her hands. "I thought I would die, too. My TARDIS was badly damaged. Life support failed. But they extracted me at the last moment."

"'They'?"

"The Time Lords. They stuck me on one of their research stations. Weapons development." The Rani set the cup down with a vicious clink. "Do what you're good at, right? So. Biologicals and counter-biologicals. Plagues and vaccines. Brain worms. Viruses to induce temporal instability. And so on, until the Daleks tracked us down. I escaped again, turned myself human, went undercover as the Ash's enslaved medical consultant... you know the rest."

"I was rooting for 'happily ever after'," said Bo.

"I'll drink to that," said the Rani, raising her cup, but it was empty. "Hmm."

Much later, in the middle of the night, Bo half-woke to hear the Rani mumbling to herself. "...should go back. It all feels wrong..." Then, seeming to realize that Bo was awake, the Rani fell silent again.

Bo mustered her resolve and cornered the Rani in their living room after work the next day, determined to get a straight answer out of her. "Do you want to go back? Back home?"

The Rani looked torn. She turned away to face the bookshelf, staring at the books and running a finger along their spines. "No. But I can't help thinking. It's strange, it's the Lauren part of me who insists I have a duty. 'Remember the Garuda,' she says. 'What if Bo had run away instead of fighting? We'd probably be dead...''"

Bo touched her arm. "I couldn't have fought him without your help. If you need to fight this war, I'll fight at your side."

"No. You have no idea what it's like. Anyway, I'm just one person. There's billions of Gallifreyans," said the Rani. She sounded tired, as if she had already had the same argument dozens of times with herself. "I'm a scientist. I only ever wanted the freedom to pursue my own research. I don't have any special powers or prophecies attached to my name. I'm not the Doctor. I'm not burdened with a savior complex. Even your father..."

"What about him?"

The Rani shook her head. "With him and the Doctor both fighting for the Time Lords, they're sure to win in the end, however much of a mess they make in the meantime."

"Sure?"

"Yes." The Rani turned back to Bo. She took a deep breath, then expelled it slowly. "Bo. Don't worry about it. Everything will be fine. We're safe here. Happily ever after, remember?"
They didn't bring it up again. Even though Bo knew that the Rani's nightmares continued, the Time Lord made a greater effort to shield her thoughts and Bo's sleep was free of alien monsters. Denial made a comfortable blanket for about two weeks.

Bo's first hint that reality had caught up came when she went to the clinic and the Rani was nowhere to be found. Instead, Evony, the former Morrigan, was standing in the middle of the Rani's lab. Bo stiffened at the sight of her. Even though Lauren had effectively defanged her by turning her human, Evony was still fabulously wealthy and well-connected, not to mention devious and ruthless.
"Evony..."

"Bo, darling." Evony greeted her with a predatory smile. "Now where's that Doctor Frankenstein of yours hiding? I came specially to offer my personal thanks."

"Thank her for what?" Bo's question trailed off as she stared at Evony in horror. "You mean... did she...?"

Evony's smile deepened. "Mama's got her groove back."

"You're fae again."

" Took her long enough; no wonder she was too scared to face me. She sent the cure by post." Evony studied herself in a mirror. "I was going to chop off a finger for every wrinkle, but it looks like I'm perfectly restored, so you can tell her she's safe."

"I --- hell. Congratulations, I guess. Now excuse me, I have to go." Bo made a hasty exit, already pulling out her phone. No answer from the Rani. Bo asked again around the clinic, but no one knew where the Rani was. She had called in sick, then simply not shown up that day. Not at home, not at the clinic. Bo tried the Dal next. No one there knew anything, either.

The next clue came as a text from Dagny, of all people. It was an address, nothing more. Bo texted back asking for more information, but got no reply. Nor did Dagny answer when Bo tried directly calling her. Bo left the address with Dyson, in case it was a trap, but refused his offer to accompany her. She clutched at the remnants of comforting denial, saying, "It's probably nothing. Maybe she texted me by accident and is too embarrassed to own up."

The address led her to a nondescript warehouse on the outskirts of the city, one among dozens of similar warehouses on a small, winding street. Bo approached with caution, but nothing jumped out or attacked, not even a cat. She could hear the cars on the nearby highway, mixed with the low drone of a generator. The main doors of the warehouse were locked. Bo found a side door and forced it open.

The inside of the warehouse looked like something straight out of a mad scientist's handbook.

Bo boggled at the sight. It didn't take long to locate Dagny and the Rani in the middle of the weird equipment, blinking lights, electric car batteries, computer screens, and tangle of cables. What the hell was Dagny doing here, and why was she hooked up to the equipment, via a mutated bike helmet and electrodes stuck all over her body?

Before Bo could voice any of her questions, the Rani was already hurrying over to meet her. "Bo! It's not what it looks like..."

Bo opened her mouth, then closed it again. Actually, she had no idea what it looked like, but she recognized the expression of guilt on the Rani's face. As for what she was feeling guilty about... The Rani ran her hands through her hair. "I'm sorry. I wish..." She turned to glare at Dagny. "I
Dagny stuck her tongue out at the Rani. "I agreed to help you, but not without explaining things to Bo."

"Explain what?" Bo took another look at the mad scientist setup, then at the Rani again. A sudden chill of realization struck her. So that was why the Rani had restored Evony: she was tying up loose ends. "You're leaving?"

"I have to," said the Rani. "I have to know. Just a quick trip to Tartarus, and then..."

"Tartarus!"

"Hades had a base there. A way to communicate with the Time Lords. If they even exist anymore." The Rani shook her head. "Infuriating as they are, I never thought before that the Time Lords might lose the war. But lately..."

"The nightmares?" guessed Bo. "They're some kind of psychic visions?"

"I can feel the web of time falling to pieces. I see the Capitol in my dreams, and it's filled with Daleks." The Rani's voice rose in increasing agitation. Bo could see her hands shaking. "Daleks everywhere. Everywhere I look."

"It's all right, it's all right," said Bo, moving forward to clasp the Rani's hands between her own. "You don't have to face them alone. No matter what happens, I'll be with you."

"I can't," said the Rani, lowering her voice to near-inaudible levels. "If I take you into the war, I'll end up using you as a weapon. The things I could do to you... you deserve better."

"Rani," began Bo. Then she hugged the Rani tightly. "It doesn't matter. Whatever happens, no more guilt trips, no more destroying our relationship in order to save our relationship, all right?"

The Rani laughed weakly. After awhile, she said, "I always used to think humans were feeble-minded for indulging in so many emotional attachments. Now... Now I know they are. All right. We'll go together."

Bo caught Dagny making a face at them and mouthing an I-told-you-so. Bo turned the Rani to face Dagny and asked, "So why do you have Dagny wired into your machine? What's that about?"

"As a Valkyrie, she has a natural ability to connect different planes of existence. I've boosted that ability so she can physically transport me to Tartarus." The Rani broke free of Bo to go fiddle with her equipment. "I'll have to adjust the settings to add you. It may take awhile..."

"No one's going anywhere yet. Bo, listen, you can't just run off like this," Dagny said. "Call them. Tell them."

The Rani took so long with her calculations and adjustments that Kenzi had enough time to fly across half the world. Dyson shuttled her from the airport to the re-union at the warehouse.

"The old gang, back together again," said Bo, then felt a pang as she remembered the ones who were lost: Hale and Trick. "One last time."

Dyson had brought a bottle of vintage Fae wine from Trick's old collection. Now he raised his glass.
"To the old gang!"

The other four joined him in the toast. At least Dyson and Kenzi had finally agreed to stay behind, thought Bo. She didn't know when (or if) she and the Rani would ever be able to return.

"Carry them safe and get back as quick as you can," said Kenzi to Dagny. "Tartarus is no Valhalla."

"No worries," said Dagny, flashing a confident smile. "I got this covered."

Eventually they ran out of things to say that weren't just delaying the inevitable. The Rani hooked Dagny up again to her equipment. Bo and the Rani each took one of Dagny's hands.

"Three... two... one... "

The world shifted. Between one breath and another, the air took on the taint of death. Shadows fell over them.

They were in Tartarus.
"No price is too great to pay for peace." --- Davros (Genesis of the Daleks)

Chapter Summary

Conservation of Daleks: it's a universal law.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Daleks.

The hated name diffused like a drop of bile through their thoughts. Caught in a moment of despair, the Doctor realized that deep in his hearts, he had hoped that his granddaughter had succeeded in eliminating them from the universe. It might almost have been worth breaking the web of time for. He could fix what was broken, couldn't he? But it had been a fool's hope.

"We're just, ah, visiting," said the Doctor, skating backwards through the columns that lined this gloomy under-level of the Citadel. He pulled Missy with him. "I'm Basil and this is my friend Missy."

"HALT! COM-MENCE SCANS," ordered the leading Dalek. It glided forward and fired a blast that narrowly missed the Doctor's head. A chunk of wall crashed to the floor behind him.

"WE O-BEY," intoned the other two. Tiny apertures opened in their front domes. Lines of bright blue light sliced across the Doctor and Missy.

"Kill them," suggested Missy, but the Doctor could tell she was as curious as he was. Both preferred to know their enemies before killing them. These Daleks were not any variant they recognized, nor was this standard Dalek scanning technology. The light sent a shiver of temporal instability over the Doctor's skin.

"SUB-JECT DES-IG-NA-TED BA-SIL EX-CEEDS AN-TI-TIME THRESH-OLD. EX-TER-MIN-ATE!"

"Oh, let's just not," said the Doctor, already dodging behind a pillar. This time, the blasts aimed at him were enough to send his senses reeling even on a near miss. Modulated chronon energy, he thought, remembering Missy's stasers.

From behind another pillar, Missy whipped out her device and sent perfectly aimed shots at the Dalek eye-stalks. The disintegration ray dissipated harmlessly in a crackle of lightning across the Dalek force shields.

The other Dalek continued relentlessly, "SUB-JECT DES-IG-NA-TED MIS-SY MEETS PA-RA-ME-TERS FOR CON-VER-SI-ON. RE- STRAIN SUB-JECT AND TRANS-PORT TO CON-VER-SI-ON FA-CIL-I-TY."

"Kill them. This time it was a command. Now."

For once the Doctor didn't argue. The Daleks didn't belong here in the first place. It should be a simple matter to wrench their timelines free and unmake them. He closed his eyes and reached out
mentally, sending out a surge of anti-time...

...and his thoughts skidded away as if they had hit a barrier of impregnable certainty. The Daleks were armored with some substance that defied anti-time as much as the circlet nailed into the Doctor's skull. He couldn't touch them directly, though they had no such constraint with their energy weapons. He retreated down the corridor, ducking and weaving behind the columns as the Daleks continued their pursuit.

Quickly, before reinforcements arrive. Missy's thoughts came with a sharp edge.

They've adapted, thought the Doctor. Life always adapts. Even the Daleks. Light flared again. Out of the corner of his eye, the Doctor saw Missy running, her stride uneven, as if she had taken a hit to the leg. They couldn't go on like this. Rage filled the Doctor, at the Daleks, at their persistent hatred, at their continuing survival even when the universe was falling apart. Even now, however much they adapted, they never changed in one fundamental aspect: their desire to exterminate everything that was not a Dalek.

He couldn't touch them directly, but he could still disrupt the timelines around them. All he had to do was to look...

...and Gallifrey had been destroyed by his own hand. An end to the war, an end to everything. There was nothing here, nothing but the void. The Daleks screeched futile commandments to each other even as they tumbled into the darkness of non-existence. Time winds hissed angrily around him. For a dazed moment, the Doctor gloried in the unraveling of the timelines. Reality was endlessly malleable under his hands, his to shape. He laughed, savoring the possibilities.

Get a grip, you fool! Pain lanced through the Doctor's skull.

"Don't think you can put a leash on me," he sneered. Then, hearing himself, he snapped back to his senses. He had to stop this before they were left without a planet to stand on. He shifted his focus, finding a stable stretch of time to cling to.

Hold on, he thought at Missy, trusting her to save herself while he drew the anti-time back into his own body and patched up the hole he had torn through the fabric of time. He had a fleeting impression of some force assisting him, but didn't dare look at it too hard, for fear of inadvertently causing further damage. Wrung out by the effort, the Doctor sagged against a pillar, not sure if it was holding him upright or if it was the other way around. Something touched his shoulder. He turned, thinking it was Missy.

The crystalline orbs of an Unbending Witness stared blindly into his face.

The Doctor gasped, instinctively moving to flee, but the anti-time creature was too swift. Her hand locked around the Doctor's wrist, holding him fast.

"Your hatred breaks Harmony and cannot be tolerated." Her voice, buzzing with anti-time, was soft, calm, inexorable. "The road of hatred must never be followed. See where it leads!"

"Tell that to the Daleks," the Doctor tried to say, but at that moment, a current of anti-time blasted its way from her hand straight into the Doctor's thoughts. He no longer saw the face before him. He could only see...

...the horror of the Time War, opening again in his mind's eye. Memories assaulted him, none of them his own, each one an echo of battle, of death, of innocents dying without ever knowing why, of time rent asunder and turned into a weapon. He saw through the eyes of a child who became a
soldier who became a traitor, living again the monstrous transformation of becoming a Dalek. Burning cinders charred his lungs. He lived, and died, and lived again, a million times in each second at the heart of the war. Anti-time carved new channels into his mind, reshaping him into...

...an Unbending Witness.

"No!" The Doctor fought to keep from being overwhelmed. Now, at last, he understood their purpose.

Anti-time itself was merely an element, a force, a power. Although it was biased towards destruction, it could only be given intent and direction when shaped by a pattern of sentience. The first Neverpeople the Doctor had met had been obsessed with revenge on the Time Lords. All those they infected with anti-time came to share their purpose. This time, Susan and Niall had wanted peace above all else, even though all they could remember was war. Thus those they touched became Emissaries of Harmony, drawn through space and time to anyone who expressed hatred with violent intent. A virus of trauma-enforced peace spread through the universe.

But not to the Daleks, encased as they were in shells that were proof against anti-time.

And not to the Doctor. What was Zagreus but his own shadow of anti-time given intent and direction? Zagreus expressed every dark thought and desire he had, without the constraint of having to be the Doctor. And why should he be the Doctor? The Doctor had failed. He had failed his family, his friends, and the web of time itself. He couldn't save any of them, but Zagreus could.

*I can do --- anything. There's nothing I can't do. Nothing.*

His own words, once, but did they come from the Doctor or from Zagreus? It didn't matter anymore. Zagreus had no fear of war or broken time. The visions continued to flood his mind, but they no longer meant anything to him.

"Is this meant to impress me?" he said through gritted teeth, binding the inrush of anti-time to his own will. "I've seen it all before. I was there."

He reversed the flow. It was easy, far too easy, to shatter the frail soul of the Unbending Witness. "The war is over. Nothing can get in or out. That's all you are. Nothing."

Then he drew all the anti-time back into himself, erasing whatever pattern it had once held and imposing his own. Time sealed itself again, and the Unbending Witness had never existed. There was only Zagreus.

No, that's wrong, thought the Doctor. He was missing something. Someone. He had to find her before, before... He couldn't remember. His thoughts were a jumble of conflicting memories. Through his confusion, he (or Zagreus) picked up the trail, following a familiar mental trace like a hound following a scent.

Everywhere he went, the pulsing hum of Dalek machinery accompanied his footsteps. The sound filled him with revulsion, as did the sight of the Daleks themselves. They occupied every level of the city with no sign of resistance, as if this were Skaro and not Gallifrey. But it was Gallifrey. Even in this distorted timeline, he recognized the structure and architectural details of the Capitol.

He suppressed his loathing and refused to engage the Daleks. Not now, not when he still had to find... find... the name eluded him. Meanwhile, it wasn't difficult to hide himself. Imitating the half-ghosts on the space station in the Void, he faded from one layer of reality into another, one in which the Capitol lay abandoned and empty of life except for a few scurrying packs of mutant pig-rats.
Empty. Useless. He raked his fingers along a wall and watched it disintegrate into a flurry of dust. He knew he could do the same to the whole planet. Who would miss it? Let the Daleks be swallowed by the Void.

No. No. No. We will survive... A whisper of thought penetrated the haze of his confused rambling.

"Who's there?" He stopped, his head jerking up and scanning the empty corridors. Ghostly Daleks passed through him without slowing. Anyway, it hadn't been a Dalek voice. Yet it was familiar, tugging at ancient memories. Another Unbending Witness? "Where are you?"

...survive... survive... survive... The echoes faded away, leaving behind only a sense of another presence, a counterpoint to his own destructive impulses.

He shook himself free of the other presence. If nothing else, it had startled him back to some semblance of clarity. The Daleks had taken Missy and he needed to find her before they converted her. The torment she would suffer, her mind and body crushed under the rigid strictures of Dalek existence, didn't bear thinking about.

He found the conversion facility in a locked compound hidden deep in the Citadel. A name surfaced in his mind, bringing with it a half-remembered nightmare of enforced servitude. "Rassilon's Foundry."

Then he saw Missy strapped inside an open Dalek shell, and everything else was forgotten. Her eyes were open, unfocused. Her mind was silent now, but he could taste the lingering psychic trace that had led him here. He reached to free her, but his fingers slipped away, too tainted by anti-time to handle the cables attached to her body. Luckily, he still had his sonic screwdriver. He used it to break the connections one by one. The shrill whine attracted the attention of the Dalek technicians posted inside the conversion facility.

"AL-ERT! DE-STROY THE IN-TRU-DER!" Two Daleks spun to face him, gunsticks clicking into place.

No more time for niceties. He reached into the shell and grabbed Missy, wrenching her free and leaping sideways into the ghost world. He hoped the shock wouldn't destroy her mind or kill her. He could smell the taint of the nano-converters permeating her skin. How deep had they sunk? They shouldn't have affected a Time Lord, but in this version of reality, the Daleks clearly had the ability to convert Gallifreyans.

He laid her carefully on the floor in the suddenly deserted chamber and examined her. He was relieved to realize that because these nano-converters were anti-time resistant, just like the Dalek shells, they hadn't crossed into this reality. A pity he couldn't do the same to rid himself of the control circlet on his head, but Missy had somehow melded it into his core identity, making it indistinguishable from his own flesh and bone. Unlike the circlet, the nano-converters were intrinsically alien invaders colonizing Missy's body. For once, his inability to grasp the resistant material worked out in his favor.

He knelt by her side, touching her face. Missy? He sent the thought questing into her mind, found only a dim echo of his own voice in response. Everywhere he looked, he saw the cruel circuits etched into her mind by the Dalek conversion process. She had chosen to retreat, shutting down her own thoughts rather than think those imposed by the Daleks. But the converters had hounded that retreating psyche, burning out every hint of independence.

He could find nothing left but scorch marks and the scars where her identity had been crudely gouged out. Only his anger and hate resonated, rousing an answering hatred from the Dalek mental
"No." He sprang to his feet and paced furiously, his whole body shaking in his denial. He refused to accept it. She wasn't dead. She wasn't a Dalek. He slammed a fist into a wall. Reality shimmered around him. He looked back, seeing himself arrive earlier. Not much earlier, but it was the difference between "too late" and "just in time".

Only a step away.

He took that step, and fell. The universe opened before his eyes. A universe gone horribly wrong, a universe full of things that should never have existed. A universe containing Daleks. To hell with them. Every other timeline was his to control. Unravel the web of time, then reweave it in a new pattern as dictated by him. Simple. He would begin with Gallifrey...

"Doctor. Stop. You're getting carried away again." The words flowed past his ears without meaning, but then a lash of pain sent him crashing to the floor, limbs twitching in agony.

"Argh." The Doctor (he was the Doctor) buried his face in his hands, breathing in ragged gasps. The pain subsided, but he didn't have the energy to get up yet. He gathered up his scattered thoughts one by one, rebuilding his sense of self. He was almost feeling himself when a loud curse broke his concentration and sent him to pieces again. "Ugh."

The bastard shaved my hair! Can you believe it?!" Missy nudged a foot into the Doctor's ribs, forcing him to focus. "Look. Just look at this."

The Doctor peeked blearily between his fingers at Missy and saw that yes, her head was now completely bald. Part of the Dalek conversion process, he supposed. He hadn't noticed before, but she clearly wasn't going to allow him to forget. "Er. I'll get you a wig..."

"I swear, I'll kill them all for this," she hissed.

The Doctor rolled onto his back, mumbling, "I was about to do that..."

"Not by destroying the entire universe, idiot." She kicked him harder. "What were you thinking?"

"That I already destroyed Skaro once, Gallifrey twice, and none of that did much good?" The Doctor said the first thing that came to mind. He just wasn't sure whose mind it was. "That I needed to work on the bigger picture? I've done it before --- " He shut his mouth abruptly.

Missy snorted in derision. "Idiot."

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," said the Doctor. It sounded feeble, even to himself. He groaned in despair at his own lack of sense.

"And just how many times have you destroyed the universe before?"

"Once. No, twice. I think. But that was River's fault. Both times. And I did put it back again." The Doctor thought about it for a moment. Then, "Except this time I was going to make improvements."

"Improvements!" scoffed Missy. "No, I have a better idea."

The blond wig really wasn't very flattering, the Doctor admitted guiltily to himself. He had found it in one of her pockets (somewhere there was a timeline where she had planned to disguise herself as a Drahvin), along with her device, which Missy had insisted was necessary to carry out her "better
idea”. He had offered to try to regrow her hair, but she hadn’t trusted him with her timeline ("You'll probably turn me ginger!") to that extent.

So here they were underneath the Panopticon, the Doctor shielding both of them while Missy did something clever to the Eye of Harmony. Even in this corrupted reality, the Time Lords had trapped a black hole in the heart of the Citadel. But now its power was harnessed for another purpose.

"The Daleks here all run on artron energy. Not only that, I picked up their intake codes while I was being converted," Missy had explained. "If I introduce a disrupting pulse into the flow from the Eye of Harmony, I can fry their tiny little brains."

Watching her now, the Doctor felt a moment of nostalgia. "You didn't have hair the last time we were down here together, either."

"How times change. Now you're the one wanting to destroy Gallifrey."

"That wasn't me, that was Zagreus," the Doctor declared.

"Yes yes yes, whatever you say, dear," said Missy. "Hang on to something. This should rock their world..."

The Doctor braced himself.

Missy flipped up a lever.

Nothing happened.

They stared at each other.

"It should have worked," said Missy.

"Maybe you dropped a digit in your calculations?"

"My calculations were perfect!"

"Clearly not. Come on, let's go see." The Doctor climbed back up to the floor of the Panopticon. From half a reality away, he watched the ghostly Daleks going on about their business with no hint of disruption.

Missy hissed a curse and drew him out of their way. "Impossible." Her fingers tightened, clawlike, on the Doctor's arm. He could feel her nails digging in, fraying his sleeve. "They must be protected somehow."

The Doctor pried at her fingers, afraid that she would break his skin and end up poisoning him. "Protected. Yes. You're right. Now I remember... there was something... someone. Not a Dalek. But a definite psychic presence holding this sorry excuse of a reality together."

"Find them."

Deep under the Citadel, the constant hum of the Dalek machinery was only a faint vibration in the walls. Somewhere in the distance, water trickled and dripped in hidden pipes. The Doctor had not seen any Daleks since he and Missy had descended into what should have been the Cloisters.

"Catacombs," murmured Missy, picking up an ancient, brittle bone. She crumbled it in her hands and let white dust scatter on the floor.
"Why would Daleks bother with catacombs?" wondered the Doctor. They had traced the psychic presence down to this level, but now the labyrinthine contours of the passages confused the spoor. Time and anti-time mingled, warping reality enough to make navigation difficult.

"Perhaps some Time Lords survive, in secret," suggested Missy. "Or the Daleks keep a slave camp tucked away in their wine cellar."

The Doctor knelt down, running a finger along the floor. He licked the finger, then said, "No Daleks have passed through here in a long time. The dust tastes of Gallifrey. Nothing else."

Mesmerized by the darkness and the silence, the Doctor and Missy wandered their separate ways. The Doctor only woke from his trance when his nose hit a door.

"Ow." He blinked, rubbing absently at his face, wondering what the door was doing here. He raised a hand and rapped his knuckles against the door. Wood. How quaint.

"Come." It was a woman's voice. The Doctor recognized the underlying psychic signature as the same presence that had opposed him before.

The door creaked as the Doctor pushed it open. He stepped across the threshold into a flare of light. As his eyes adjusted, he saw a woman sitting behind a small table, a deck of Gallifreyan Tarot cards spread out before her. A globular lamp floated above the cards, illuminating the room with a cold white light. At the sight of the Doctor, the woman stood up, studying him warily. Her eyes widened in sudden recognition.

"Snail!" she gasped. "No. That's not possible..."

The Doctor froze. No one called him that. Not now... not in any reality he acknowledged. Only one person had ever used that nickname. It had to be her. No wonder her psychic signature felt so familiar. He whispered incredulously, "Innocet?"

"Truthless, now," she returned sharply.

The Doctor nodded, taking in the nun's garb she wore. He had last seen her a thousand years ago, or billions, depending on how he counted. Sending her to her death, as he had thought at the time, on the final day of the Time War. But of course it wasn't the same person, not in this version of reality.

Truthless backed away, not taking her eyes from the Doctor. "You're dead. You died centuries ago. I put your bones in the catacombs. You can't be here now. No one would dare, unless..." She reached behind her back to fumble in a cabinet. "Unless Koschei ---" She broke off, staring past the Doctor.

A proprietary hand descended on his shoulder. From behind him, Missy said, "You were saying?"

"The only way to bring him back is as an abomination. You know that." Truthless was suddenly pointing a staser at the Doctor. "It's forbidden."

"And I care, because...?" Missy stepped around the Doctor, aiming her own device at Truthless.

"He's a creature of anti-time. He'll destroy us all," said Truthless. "Maybe you think you can control him, but you're wrong."

The Doctor cleared his throat. "Ahem. Still here. Speaking of rights and wrongs, what I want to know is, why are you protecting the Daleks?"

"The what?" Her bewilderment seemed genuine.
"Daleks. The big murderous pepperpots living in the city above you? Perhaps you've noticed them, now and then?" said the Doctor.

"You mean the Mark Three travel machines?"

"If that's what you want to call them," said the Doctor. He waved an impatient hand. "Gallifrey is falling apart and you're protecting your conquerors?"

"'Conquerors'? What conquerors? Was your mind damaged by your resurrection?" Truthless's eyebrows knitted in confusion. "Yes, Gallifrey is corroded by anti-time. The Weeping Sisterhood was not strong enough to maintain its integrity. Our timelines are corrupt, our reality in doubt. That's why Rassilon devised the Mark Three travel machines to save those of untainted blood who were left. Their shells protect them from corruption. They may have become a little insular in their outlook, but they are the purest exemplars of our race."

"The 'purest exemplars'?" echoed the Doctor in strangled tones. "You mean, they are..."

"They have achieved control over their timelines in the face of dissolution," said Truthless. "They are the Time Lords. They --- "

Whatever she meant to say next turned into a cry of pain. Missy had shot the staser out of her hand. The second shot followed immediately, taking Truthless between the hearts.

A look of horrified reproach contorted her face. A moment later, Truthless dropped lifelessly to the ground.

Chapter End Notes

Ha ha, Cousin Infodump is back with another bedtime story. And Rassilon with more trademark infringement and intellectual property theft. Someone needs to hit him with a lawsuit. Alas, we have Zagreus and not the Valeyard here.
"Chaos and anarchy loosed upon us all." --- Romana (Neverland)

"They're DALEKS!" For one brief moment, Missy's usual mask of smug indifference slipped. "Davros or Rassilon, Kaleds or Gallifreyans, it doesn't matter. They're DALEKS."

The Doctor rushed forward to catch Truthless as she fell. He didn't even know if Gallifreyans could regenerate in this version of reality. And even if they did, he didn't know if she had any remaining regenerations. If Missy had killed her...

"She was shielding the Daleks," said Missy. She stepped past the Doctor to investigate the cabinets on the far wall. "Look at this. A reality lock and chronomorphic stabilisers." Missy twisted a dial and flicked a switch. "Popcorn time!"

The force that had been clamped around the timeline suddenly dissipated. Missy's alterations to the Eye of Harmony finally took effect. The Doctor felt the floor shiver beneath him. The sound of distant explosions boomed through the walls. He closed his eyes, knowing that Missy must have triggered the weapon of last resort --- effectively a self-destruct --- on all the Daleks in the city. He could see it as clearly as if he had done it himself.

_Not just the city, came Missy's thought. Everywhere. The Eye had hyperspace links extending all over the universe._

"No..." moaned Truthless, stirring in the Doctor's arms. Her form softened, as if all the structure had been drained from it. Anti-time welled up from inside her bones. Possibility twisted around her. Her words came out distorted, phrases overlapping as if reality was still undecided. "What have you done?" "They're all dead!" "My children!" "You monsters..."

Missy opened more cabinets. "A transmat." She touched the controls. "We don't need any interruptions today."

"That's the least of our worries," muttered the Doctor. He could feel time fraying around him, revealing the bleak emptiness that lay beneath the reality Truthless had been gluing together. "Truthless. You can't have been holding it all by yourself. Not even you have the strength to..."

Truthless opened her eyes. Her form had solidified at last, her face subtly altered from the one she had worn before, but the memory eluded the Doctor. Before he could think why, she had shoved herself away from him and jumped to her feet. "Murderers!" Her face was ashen, her voice filled with despair and horror. "Monsters. Better you had been strangled in the Loom!"

"Shall I shut her up for you, Doctor?" Missy glanced up from her examination of the cabinets.

"No!" The Doctor took a deep breath, running a hand through his hair, frowning as his fingers slipped past the metal circlet. "Listen. We're not who you think we are. We're not even from this reality."

"This is the only reality left," said Truthless. "Gallifrey stands on a breath and a prayer. It's one thing for you to refuse conversion. But to deny survival to everyone else... that is the most vile selfishness!"

"Tell me." The Doctor held her gaze. "When did I refuse 'conversion'?"

All the anger seemed to drain out of her face. In a tone devoid of hope, she said, "It makes no difference now. I may as well tell you the things you have forgotten."
The Capitol was the last bastion of pure time left on Gallifrey. The outer lands were inhabited by mutants, savage tribes that fed off of each other in a desperate struggle to survive. Hidden in the catacombs beneath the Capitol, the Weeping Sisterhood maintained the Last Loom. Once there had been more, but now all children were woven from a single genetic loom, loosed to scurry like pig-rats in the darkness under the catacombs. At twelve years of age, when they were young enough to be uncorrupted by anti-time but old enough to cast readable shadows of their futures, they were taken for selection.

A few were given to the Sisterhood to be trained in the manipulation of time and anti-time, while the rest were sent to the conversion facility. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, the conversion was successful and the anti-time was cleansed from the subject. But once in awhile...

"Sometimes conversion fails when a mutation slips through the Loom," said Truthless, not looking at the Doctor. He remembered the "deformity" that had earned him his childhood nicknames, but said nothing. "And sometimes the child refuses to accept conversion."

"And then what?" asked the Doctor.

"They return the body to the Sisterhood." Truthless picked up a child's skull and offered it to the Doctor. Her voice had been calm as she led the Doctor and Missy through the winding paths of the catacombs and gave her explanations. Her story wove itself through the ether, reinforcing reality with her words. Now, touching the ancient bones, remembered grief tightened her throat. "This was... yours."

The Doctor accepted it wordlessly, held it delicately between his fingers and stared into the empty eye sockets. What had it seen, before its death, he wondered. Was it refusal, or merely a chance mutation, that killed it?

"Shortly after that, right before her initiation, Koschei disappeared. We thought... suicide. Because you --- they --- had run together as children, you see. But no one ever found a corpse."

"Koschei was destined for the Sisterhood?" The Doctor glanced back at Missy, raising an eyebrow. She shrugged back. "How many of you are there? Enough for a football team? More? A whole league? Come on, let's have a look at them."

Truthless took the skull back from the Doctor and replaced it in its nook. "Follow me."

The Doctor fell into step behind her, a familiar pattern from a distant childhood. A wisp of memory strayed into his mind.

*She was only three years older than he was, but wiser and infinitely more level-headed. She had taken the two of them under her wing, protecting them from the darkness until the year she was chosen for the Sisterhood. After that, he had rarely seen her again, and when he had, she had been silent under the weight of new responsibilities.*

*It wasn't you! Missy's reminder was a slap across his thoughts. And this isn't your cousin. She's obviously leading us into a trap.*

Ah, thought the Doctor. Of course. She's buying time for someone else to prepare our reception. He shook his head, clearing the corrupted memories from his mind. He glanced back to find Missy lagging farther and farther behind.

She raised a finger to her lips in warning.
I thought you had a plan, he thought.

_This Gallifrey isn't quite what I expected_, she admitted. _My original plan may need a few modifications._

Things got away from you, and you need my help, interpreted the Doctor. As usual.

_You refused to take us to the right version of reality, you stubborn old pig. So if you find it unpleasant, you have only yourself to blame._

That was hardly fair, thought the Doctor. He hadn't consciously chosen to bring them here. Had he? Or was there a part of himself that cursed the Time Lords for being no better than the Daleks, and this was the ironic culmination of that line of thought? He didn't know...

_You never do. Never mind. You go and spring the trap. It'll be great fun, I'm sure._

The Doctor turned again, but Missy was nowhere to be seen. What was she up to now?

_A bit of poking around. I'll see what I can do with the equipment in your not-cousin's cabinets..._ Her thoughts faded as her mental shields tightened.

The Doctor forced his attention back to his surroundings. Once they were out of the catacombs, the passages took on a more rational conformation, free of the uncertainty cast by anti-time. Underneath that, the foundations of reality felt steadier than they had since Missy had shot Truthless. The rest of the Sisterhood must be taking up the slack in maintaining the fabric of time, surmised the Doctor.

Truthless continued on silently, not looking back.

A trapezoid of pure darkness descended on them from behind. The Doctor only had time to hear the telltale whine of the time scoop before it enveloped them both.

"I should have known," said the Doctor. They had been deposited in the Dark Tower, the one in the Death Zone. In the original timeline, Rassilon had been dead for millenia, and the monument was known as his tomb.

In this reality, the founder of Time Lord civilization was very much alive and physically present, his timeline unscarred by death. His psychic aura was unmistakeable, even though this was not an incarnation the Doctor had encountered before. He was tall and broad-shouldered, wearing a silvery coronet over thinning gray hair. His robes were heavy and lined with zybanium and zero matter, long enough to sweep the floor with. His voice was as arrogant as ever. "Welcome to my tower. Thank you for escorting our guest, Sister Truthless."

Truthless glanced between the Doctor and Rassilon. Her face ashen, she said to Rassilon, "My lord, they've killed... killed all the Time Lords. I couldn't stop them. I'm sorry." She took a step forward, then knelt, bowing her head. "The failure is mine. Punish me as you will, but spare my sisters, I beg of you."

Rassilon laughed, gracious in the manner of someone with secret triumph bubbling in his hearts. He raised Truthless to her feet. "No matter, Sister. It was foreseen that my success would draw my enemies into the open at last." He turned his gaze to the Doctor. "That's you, is it? Pitiful abomination, you shall not hinder my plans."

"I'm not the abomination here," said the Doctor. "These plans of yours... Let me guess: Gallifrey under your boot, the rest of the universe to follow. No dissent, no alternatives, no divergence."
"Order, peace, and prosperity for my children, forever. Gallifrey is the oldest civilization. There is no need for any other. And this, at last, I have achieved," boasted Rassilon.

"But they're dead, murdered," said Truthless. Tears glinted in her eyes. "So many deaths."

"We will loom more, as many as we need. All the time in the universe belongs to us, now," said Rassilon. "And the new generation will be even stronger than before."

"That hardly helps the ones who are already dead," murmured the Doctor dryly. He had never expected to see anyone weep for the Daleks, but he could see that Truthless was sincere in her grief. For the first time, he felt a glimmering of guilt. Even so --- he raised his voice and stared at Rassilon. "No. This ends. You will not convert any more children of Gallifrey into Daleks!"

Rassilon's eyes widened, showing surprise for the first time. "How do you know that name?"

"How do you?" snapped the Doctor in return.

"I was touched by the hand of an Unbending Witness," said Rassilon. "It showed me many things, but I am Rassilon, and I remain the master of my own mind."

"Really? I have to question the sanity of anyone who voluntarily turns their own people into --- "

"--- the pinnacle of Gallifreyan evolution," interrupted Rassilon. "They are powerful, obedient --- "

"--- blobs of curdled hate in mini-tanks!" finished the Doctor. They glared at each other for a moment. The Doctor wondered then about the influence of the Cruciform, if it reached even here, transmitted from the war zone through the minds of the Unbending Witnesses. Was it the weave of destiny that twisted Rassilon's thinking to the point where no rational argument could sway him? If Daleks did not exist, were the Time Lords compelled to re-create them?

"I think it's you who are consumed by hatred," said Rassilon, smiling. He raised a fist, sparks crackling on the skin of his metal gauntlet he wore.

"Both of them are," said Truthless. "There was someone else with him. It was Koschei, my lord."

Rassilon lowered his gauntlet and stared at Truthless. "What did you say? No, you must be mistaken."

Truthless shook her head. "I am not. It was her. All those years I thought she was dead, but..."

"This is some trickery wrought by the abomination," growled Rassilon. He turned back to the Doctor. "Speak! What do you think to accomplish with this base deception?"

"It's not a matter of what I think to accomplish, but what she's been up to all this time I've been talking to you," said the Doctor.

"Nothing. Nothing whatsoever!" Rassilon stared right through the Doctor, the coronet on his head shedding jagged flashes of silver light.

"My lord!" Truthless gasped, sweat glistening on her face. The Doctor sensed her effort to keep reality from disintegrating. "You... what are you doing? The fabric of time will not hold."

"It will hold. The Sisters aren't the only ones capable of manipulating timelines, not anymore," said
Rassilon. He hesitated, then continued, "Let me introduce you to my most valued servant."

_Time steadied again, but there was an additional presence in the tower...

...a hunched, distorted figure, thick with anti-time. It appeared in the corner, holding a sack over one shoulder. It turned lidless, staring eyes towards Rassilon and croaked in a dry, rasping voice, "My lord Rassilon."

"It can't be." The Doctor's appalled disbelief warred with instinctive recognition of that gaunt, skeletal face and the indomitable will that underscored every pained breath.

If anything, Truthless was even more horrified by the hooded monstrosity. "Another abomination!"

"One tamed to my will, Sister Truthless. Look closer."

Seemingly mesmerized by the unblinking glare, Truthless stepped closer. "Koschei?"

"I saved her from the embrace of an Emissary of Harmony. Now she serves only me," said Rassilon. "Slave, have you captured the imposter as I instructed?"

"My lord," replied the anti-time creature. Without transition, it was standing in front of Rassilon, the sack dumped at his feet. With the blade now in its hand, it sliced the top of the sack open. It fell apart in strips of discordant spaces. The sack had been bigger on the inside. Now Missy tumbled out, a limp heap on the tower floor, the blond wig knocked awry and covering half her face.

Heavy stun, thought the Doctor. He tested their mental link, but couldn't sense anything from her mind. As for the creature, it was all too familiar, as was the blade it held.

"This is wrong." Truthless's voice grew stronger as she turned to face Rassilon. "You call her your slave, but that doesn't change anything. A creature of anti-time will inevitably corrupt everything we have built, my lord."

"Nonsense," scoffed Rassilon. "She is my assassin, hunting down the Emissaries one by one, securing the universe for my children."

"Truthless, listen to me," said the Doctor, heartened by her hint of rebellion. If Rassilon was too far gone, perhaps Truthless could still be persuaded. "This whole reality is wrong, but if we work together, we can salvage Gallifrey. There can still be a future ---" 

"'Work together'?" Truthless looked sicken by the thought. "Haven't you done enough damage already?"

"Enough, yes, and that's why you have to let me make amends," said the Doctor. "You must see that Rassilon's so-called 'travel machines' are not the answer, unless the question is 'what's the last thing Gallifrey needs?'"

Truthless shook her head, not looking at him. "Lord Rassilon, I beg you to reconsider. Release these two abominations into the Void. The Sisterhood will do everything in its power for our people, but this..." She sighed. "I must return to my duties."

"Truthless, wait." The Doctor started after her.

A bolt of energy shot past him and blasted into Truthless. Her image seemed to hang in the air before disintegrating into a fall of ashes. This time, she was dead beyond any possibility of regeneration.
"No!" The Doctor whirled, shouted at Rassilon, "What did you do that for? She already refused to help me. She was no threat to you!"

Rassilon pointed his gauntlet at the Doctor. "Maybe not today, but someday she would have betrayed me." The gauntlet glowed a bright blue. Even as it discharged another deadly bolt, the Doctor dodged sideways into the desolation of the ghost world. This was Gallifrey as it would have been without the Weeping Sisterhood's intervention, he thought. Without Truthless, did they still have enough power to hold it back?

He didn't have time to think about it. A blade slashed a line in the air and the hooded, decrepit anti-time creature appeared through the crack: Rassilon had sent his assassin to kill the Doctor.

The Doctor backed away, hands raised in a pacifying gesture. "Let's talk about this, hmm? You don't have to do this, you know."

"I am the Slave and I... obey Lord Rassilon," croaked the assassin, shuffling forward.

The Doctor winced. As much as he had hated his old friend's choice of sobriquet and vicious ambition, this broken monster was not anything he had ever wished to see. "You can't trust him. He may have saved you once, but only in order to use you."

"Kill!" The creature's dry exhalation was suddenly too close. The Doctor frantically wrestled for control of the knife. The withered limbs held surprising strength. Time and reality warped around them, as they each struggled to bend chance in their own favor.

"Listen! You are no one's slave." The Doctor's thoughts battered at a mind locked in layers of chains. As soon as he pried a crack between a pair of links, another pair snapped shut, blocking him, and he cursed the weakness of his telepathic powers. "I know what it's like. In another lifetime, in another reality, I was the one who became his pet monster."

"You?" The bulging eyes reddened in jealous rage. "Never. I am the only. Only one. You do not. Belong. Here."

The blade pressed closer and closer to the Doctor. Reality slipped again, and the Doctor was sprawled on his back, the weight of the anti-time creature grown unnaturally heavy. The tip of the knife touched his throat. His hand locked around the other's wrist, holding it in place. Space opened behind him, the time winds threatening to sweep him away.

The uncanny blade became the only fixed point in the chaos. The Doctor strained to see past it to its wielder. Listen to me, he thought. You need to remember.

"Remember. What?"

*Remember that we are the Master. Whatever Rassilon's done to you, it's time to show him who really holds the leash!* The thought was sent through the Doctor's mind in a lightning-stroke of psychic power, with a precision beyond his own skills. Missy. She must be awake at last. Another thought lanced through the Doctor, but so compressed that he couldn't catch any meaning from it.

The blade trembled, then lifted from the Doctor's throat.

Of course, thought the Doctor. Missy had always been better than him at getting along with herself. Six billion copies of the Doctor would have resulted in four billion rows breaking out simultaneously, but the Master had somehow managed perfect coordination.

Reality jolted back into place. The assassin loosed the Doctor and turned to face Rassilon, rasping,
"You! You did this to me!"

The past laid itself over the present, forcing the old pattern to play itself out anew. Through blurred double-vision, the Doctor saw the anti-time creature charge Rassilon (both Rassilons) at the same time as the bleached-blond Master poured out his life energy in lethal blasts. Time stretched and broke. Then Missy was dragging the Doctor clear of the vortex, even as her anti-time echo rammed Rassilon and pushed him in.

"Saved by the power of nostalgia. How sentimental!" The Doctor seized the ragged edges of the temporal fabric and knotted them back together, sealing the rift. He kept his attention on the scar, in case Rassilon tried to claw his way back through, but it seemed the anti-time assassin had been thorough in cutting its former puppet-master out of reality.

"It's not sentiment. It was merely a convenient memory," said Missy, releasing the Doctor. "Echoes in time."

"I didn't know that was possible," admitted the Doctor. She had sent the pattern through him, using anti-time to reshape her alternate self. Reshaped and consigned her to oblivion. So much for 'sentimental'. The Doctor shook his head and looked around. He was startled to see light streaming in through the walls and ceiling of the tower.

A moment later, there was no tower. He and Missy stood alone on a barren outcropping of solid rock. A chilly wind whistled past his ears. There was no sign of sentient life in any direction. They were in the ghost town version of Gallifrey. The Doctor frowned at the sight. He tried to shift them back, but it was as if the inhabited version of Gallifrey had never existed.

The Sisterhood, thought the Doctor. Where were the Sisterhood? He could no longer sense their psychic influence on the timelines.

_They were weak. They no longer have any anchor in our reality_, Zagreus gloated, showing the Doctor a replay of their battle with the Slave. This time, he saw the moment when reality was re-written without the Weeping Sisterhood. He couldn't even tell whose side had made the change. At the time, he had only cared about securing every possible advantage.

He could get them back. He only had to _look_ for them...

"Stop it." Missy yanked him back from the brink of dissolving the universe again.

"Agh," he groaned. He sat down heavily, covering his face with his hands. "But that means there's no one left."

"Just us." Missy came up behind him and massaged his shoulders. "Now don't be such a grumpy-pants. Things aren't that bad."

"Not that bad!!?" the Doctor spluttered, not finding the massage the least bit relaxing under the circumstances. "Gallifrey is dead, and so is the rest of the universe, if we can believe Rassilon --- and however much of a megalomaniac he was, I don't think he was lying about that."

"I know. Just think. The whole universe. Ours at last! We can do whatever we want, and there's no one left to stop us."

"Finally checked that off your to-do list after all these millenia?" The Doctor let his hands drop. He sighed when he found the outlook as dismal as ever.

Missy sat down next to him and followed his gaze. "Of course, it needs doing up, this universe of
They tried. They really did. Missy had a plan, involving painstaking manipulation of the timelines, weaving them back together strand by strand to restore intelligent life to Gallifrey. Once they had a Gallifrey free of anti-time corruption, a Gallifrey with Time Lords and time technology, they would be able to acquire a TARDIS and start on the rest of the universe.

By the second day, he thought he would implode from boredom. Every time Missy used him to construct another delicate, perfectly balanced piece of the puzzle, the Doctor struggled with an urge to kick everything over. It was like watching someone else assemble a complicated line of dominoes. That temptation to just push over the first piece became overwhelming. The Doctor was reminded of their Academy days, when he used to ruin her (enviably perfect) time experiments.

Once he let an Emissary of Harmony slip through, but it was too easy to dispatch and the resulting disruption of the timelines set them back a week.

After that, he forced himself to restrain such counter-productive impulses, while Missy kept a tight rein on Zagreus, who saw no problem with a universe soaked with anti-time. To distract himself, he peered gently outwards, careful not to tear the fabric of time with his looking. What had happened in the rest of the universe? He gathered his data glimpse by glimpse, building up a slow apocalyptic vision.

*The Emissaries of Harmony spread exponentially through space and time, because where there was life, there was conflict. Each Emissary ripped through reality, leaving a gaping hole for anti-time to flow in. In the end, there were no minds left capable of hatred, or anything else. Gallifrey had been the last bastion of intelligence left...*

"And look what they did with it," said the Doctor. "They made themselves into ghouls and Daleks."

"Good thing we stepped in, then," said Missy. They had progressed as far as introducing primitive hunter-gatherers back onto Gallifrey. The tricky part was to keep the tribes from fighting each other (from ever having fought). Agriculture would add another layer of difficulty to her calculations, but that was a problem for next week.

"No. No, it's wrong," said the Doctor suddenly. "I don't believe it."

"Don't believe what?"

"That we're the only ones left. Haven't you sensed it? A blind spot, resisting our influence?" The Doctor felt it as a nagging bit of leftover time in the back of his mind. He forced himself to focus on it. "There's someone else. Someone we forgot to account for."

"All the Time Lords are dead," said Missy tiredly. "Or... do you mean Omega?"

The Doctor shook his head. "We would have noticed him. No. I don't mean a Time Lord."

"Then who?"

"I had a friend once. We ran together..." --- the Doctor (Death in Heaven)

Chapter Summary

Introducing (retconning) our deus ex machina, or firing Chekhov's gun, if we're being generous.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Everyone knows that Gallifrey is an old planet, but only a few know that there exist places on Gallifrey even older than that.

The Stone Garden tucked away in the deepest fold of Mount Cadon is one such place. The scholars of Prydon Academy call it a naturally occurring karst formation with unique morphological features. Massive pillars of chrono-active limestone distort the flow of time currents, resulting in spatiotemporal anomalies. The more superstitious Cousins of House Lungbarrow claim that the Stone Garden is an ancient labyrinth built to trap a monster from the Dark Times.

Whatever the truth of it, there is certainly a system of limestone caves that extends wide and deep underneath the Stone Garden. No one is sure how deep or how wide. Space and time are woven in unpredictable twists inside the caverns. Throughout Gallifreyan history, a handful of renegades, hermits, and Outsiders have taken up residence in the Stone Garden and the caves underneath. Living chambers have been hollowed out and natural caverns reshaped to esoteric purposes. Later abandoned, they became the target of budding archaeologists from Prydon Academy, even though expeditions beneath the Stone Garden were officially forbidden.

Theta Sigma, who had not thought about the Stone Garden since he had been admitted to the Academy, was reminded of its peculiarities the year that Koschei took to wearing the bone mask. That was the same year in which the bullies had become particularly unpleasant to the two of them. The sheer strangeness of the mask set their tormentors aback, at least temporarily. Crude and barbaric, it evoked the primal Gallifreyan soul that Time Lords buried under the dry dust of civilization.

Koschei refused to remove the mask, even for formal dinners, claiming that he had joined Faction Paradox. He insisted on being addressed henceforth as "Cousin Koschei." "If you saw my true face, I'd have to kill you."

Everyone laughed it off, knowing full well that "Faction Paradox" was just a story the upperclassmen frightened the first year students with. They assumed Koschei had made the mask himself. It wasn't difficult to sneak into the art room and lift a few supplies. The jeering of the bullies reached epic levels of scorn.

Theta wasn't so sure. The mask struck him as familiar. It took him days to remember where he had seen it before. It was a few days more before he cornered Koschei privately and asked him about it. Theta caught Koschei by the sleeve and said, "The mask is called 'Anguish'."

Koschei spun around in a swirl of robes and caught Theta's wrist in turn. His voice came clearly through the mask. "What do you know about it?"
"I know where you found it," said Theta. He tried not to shrink away from the fierce-eyed bird of prey glaring at him with its face of bleached bone. "I know what's written inside the mask: 'No faithful heart in any living thing. Wear me and show your face no more.'"

Koschei shrugged his arm free, taking a step back. "Then you know this mask holds the power to command a creature from legend. We'll finally be able to force them to leave us in peace."

"You can't be serious! Listen to yourself, a 'legend'."

"It's real enough. If you've seen the mask before, then you must have seen the technology embedded in it. It's powerful enough to level entire cities."

"I know," said Theta, wanting to shake sense into his friend. His fingers clenched the fabric of his own robe instead. "That's why I wasn't stupid enough to put the damned thing on my face!"

"You think a rock is all you need, is that it? Someday that won't be enough," said Koschei.

"What? What are you talking about?" A memory threatened to surface, but Theta shoved it down ruthlessly.

Koschei's eyes glittered through the mask. "Nothing."

"They'll report us," said Theta. "We'll be expelled."

"No one would believe them. It's just a silly legend, remember?" Koschei laughed. "As long as we're careful about it, we can have it both ways."

"That's stupid. You can't honestly believe that." Theta stomped a foot in frustration at the unsoundness of his friend's reasoning. "Not that you'll find out any differently, since you'll probably be killed first."

"How do you know? Unless... have you have seen this creature before!"

Theta shook his head. "No. And I don't want to, either. It's supposed to be one of the Yssgaroth, for Omega's sake."

"I've been researching the archives, looking up maps and old records on the Stone Garden," said Koschei. "But you've been there before. When? Why didn't you tell me?"

"A hermit took me there," said Theta. "It was a long time ago. Before I met you. He used to tell me stories."

"I wish I'd known. You could have helped me find the mask sooner," said Koschei. "Never mind. You can help me find the Yssgaroth, instead."

"It's insanely dangerous!" argued Theta, and continued arguing until Koschei slammed the door of his room in Theta's face.

When Koschei sneaked away from the Academy hours before dawn the next day, Theta tagged along behind him, maintaining a sullen silence long after first sunrise and far into full day. Koschei matched his silence, not deigning to say a word until mid-day, when they stopped to rest in a wide spot along the otherwise precarious mountain path. They each picked a tree to lean against, far enough to preserve the illusion of independence, but close enough to scowl at each other.

Theta wiped his face with his sleeve. This late in summer, the day was hot and dry, and much of the
path was exposed to bare sky. Both Theta and Koschei had given up their student robes in favor of Shobogan clothing, which was easier to walk in for any kind of lengthy outdoor expedition.

"I found their names in the archives," Koschei said by way of a peace offering. "The Time Lord who made this mask was called Valentine. They say he was the first to live in the Stone Garden. The first Gallifreyan. The other, the Yssgaroth, was called Immindiyan."

"I'm sure that'll be a great comfort to know when we're squashed like bugs," said Theta.

"We won the war, didn't we? I don't know what you're worried about," said Koschei.

"And I don't know how you think you're going to keep an Yssgaroth. Are you planning to invite it home for dinner?"

"Rassilon forbid. My father would flay me." Koschei lifted his mask just enough to fan his face with a hand. Theta could only imagine how overheated he must be underneath the layer of bone, but he knew Koschei was too stubborn to take it off for the sake of mere comfort. "But think about it, Theta. One of the Yssgaroth. Don't tell me you're not curious."

There was a long pause before Theta answered, and then only in a shamed mumble, "Yes-I-am."

"Then what are you waiting for?" Koschei straightened up, bounding over to grab Theta by the arm. "Come along, come along!"

It was just after the second sun set that Koschei and Theta reached the outer edges of the Stone Garden. By then, they were both too tired to appreciate its peculiar morphology. The gray stones towered over them in bewildering formations, here narrow, there wide, shunting them through an arch and down crudely-carved steps into deeper and deeper shadows. Multiple realities met in the Stone Garden. Past, present, and future mingled in confusing eddies. Any given feature existed only sporadically. Luck and timing determined what a visitor could find there.

Koschei and Theta trudged through the gloom, following their instincts as much as the maps that Koschei had memorized. Every time Koschei stopped to compare their location to his mental image, Theta was ready to suggest a route, picked at random (despite claiming to have a perfect sense of direction). Even back then, long before he had acquired a reputation for it, Theta had a way of blundering into danger, and what was more dangerous than the mythical monster at the heart of the labyrinth?

Once they descended into the caverns, Koschei pulled out a pair of light sticks, handing one to Theta. "Don't go wandering off, eh?"

"Wouldn't dream of it," Theta grumbled. He didn't like the shadows cast by Koschei's mask-distorted form. They hinted at some larger beast too sly to be seen in the light. But there was no use thinking about that. He hurried after Koschei.

"This must be it," stated Koschei. He traced a finger across the wall in front of them. It was smooth stone, glistening with moisture. "It's not all here."

"Your mask," whispered Theta, backing away a step. "It's glowing."

"Good," said Koschei triumphantly. "That means it's working. What was the story the hermit told you?"
"He said that at the end of the Great Time War, all the Yssgaroth except one were banished or killed." Theta eyed the wall. It had become translucent, less solid, with an answering light glowing beneath the surface. Something serpentine took shape behind the light. This is a stupid idea, he thought, but they had come this far. He couldn't leave before they found out the truth of the legend. "The last one was captured by a Time Lord officer and imprisoned deep beneath Mount Cadon."

Koschei nodded. "Captain Valentine. He made this mask in order to control the monster."

"I wonder what happened to him?" said Theta. He ducked behind Koschei and peered around his shoulder at the glowing wall. Shadows flared behind the serpentine shape. Wings?

He left. He ran. Long and long has it been. The voice pierced their thoughts, sharp and cold like shards of ice.

Shocked, Theta grabbed Koschei and dragged him back, away from the wall. Theta didn't stop until his own back hit the wall on the opposite side.

"Let go of me!" hissed Koschei. He twisted free and took one step forward, tugging at his clothes and drawing himself up into a more imposing stance. He announced loudly, "Immindiyan of the Yssgaroth, you will obey me."

The wall thinned further. Were those eyes or tiny stars? The serpentine figure reared up, creating empty space around itself. Theta stared, aghast, unable to see it properly. It was real, it wasn't a myth, and it would squash them like bugs. Like bugs.

Is it Valentine? Have you returned as you promised, my love? Have you made your choice at last?

"It doesn't matter who I am," said Koschei haughtily. "I wear the mask that commands you."

You wear the mask that Valentine carved from his own bones and inscribed with his own nightmares. If you are not Valentine, then you are a thief deserving of a thousand deaths. The serpentine figure, now grown impossibly gargantuan, surged forward, ready to crush Koschei beneath its massive coils.

Theta imagined he could hear stone giving way under that weight. He frantically scrambled in front of his friend and waved his arms. "Wait wait wait! Can't we discuss this like civilized..." Then he fell over as Koschei rammed him and sat on him, the rest of his sentence lost. "Oof."

"Don't think you can scare me, monster," said Koschei. He grabbed Theta's collar and twisted, preventing him from interrupting again. "I know this mask can destroy you. Don't force me to use it!"

That is so. Valentine created it in his anger. It will kill us both. Is that your desire?

"Wait, what?" Uncertainty crept into Koschei's tone for the first time. His hands released Theta's collar and went to the mask he wore. Squashed, interjected Theta mentally, like bugs. Koschei's thought shot back in irritation and panic: shut up.

"It's true, isn't it?" muttered Theta, eyes squeezed shut, hands trapped awkwardly underneath his body as he sprawled face-down on the muddy cavern floor. We're going to die, he thought morbidly. We're both going to die here, covered in mud where no one will ever find our corpses. At least we'll take one of the Ancient Enemy with us.

Who's your "Ancient Enemy"? What are you natterring on about, little bug?
"'No faithful heart,'" quoted Theta, pulling his thoughts together. "Why would he inscribe that into a weapon?"

"He must have meant you." Koschei completed the thought. "A Time Lord and an Yssgaroth? Were you... together? Is that even legal?"

*You understand nothing of love.*

"It must have been more than just a marriage contract," said Theta. "If love was involved."

"Stupid," tutted Koschei.

"Irrational," agreed Theta. He thought of Koschei’s father and couldn't imagine him tying himself to anything more than a limited-term contract, and he imagined his son to be just as practical. Theta's parents, on the other hand, had been secret romantics. And how well had that ended? Exile, a cover-up, and Theta abandoned to the care of House Lungbarrow.

*Our bond was eternal: share the sweet, share the bitter, live together, die together. I am Immindiyan of the Yssgaroth. I would not give myself for less than everything.*

"So you two had your own private truce, your own private alliance." Koschei sounded both amused and disappointed, but Theta could sense his friend's fear under the bravado. Without needing to discuss it, they took turns poking and prodding at the monster, hoping for any sliver of advantage. "And then you... what, moldered here in this pit ever since?"

*We had our fill of war. We chose to retire from the world. This was a garden once.*

 Theta had managed to free one of his hands by now, and he waved it vaguely in Immindiyan's direction. "Only it's just you now. So what happened?"

The serpentine figure loomed even larger, the tail lashing viciously. Theta could feel the wind of beating wings cut across his face, and he was almost sorry he had asked the question. The answer came slowly, thoughts edged with icy regret, *I was a fool twice over.*

Koschei shifted off Theta and pulled him half-upright, then dragged him backwards, but there was nowhere to go. The exit had vanished into blank stone. "Let's not make it thrice. Open the door!"

*Kinship is strong among my people,* came Immindiyan's mournful thought, ignoring Koschei's demand. *A mating was arranged for me. I was too weak to refuse the will of the clan. I was too weak to confront Valentine with my betrayal.*

"What did you do?" asked Theta. He and Koschei huddled together with the wall at their backs. He didn't know if Koschei had a plan, but every second they could keep the monster talking was another second to survive and think up a way to escape.

*You must understand. He was not a Time Lord then. Our war was with another race. I could name them, but the name would mean nothing to you. Suffice to say that at the end of the war, they all ascended from the material universe. Valentine was the last, just as this labyrinth here is the last remnant of his world.*

"According to Academy records, it's true that this place is older than the rest of Gallifrey," said Koschei.

*Yes. Immindiyan drew itself into a tight coil. But Valentine. Alas, Valentine. I thought it better if we had never met. I uprooted him from time and replanted him in another time and place.*
"Let me guess," said Theta. "It went wrong. As things do."

*It was impossible, yet somehow he remembered. Through some power inherent in himself, or perhaps something I overlooked in your race, Valentine clawed through the veil of time to find his original self. He brought with his past the whole war... hence the war you know from your history.*

"Between the Yssgaroth and the first Time Lords," said Koschei. "A war we won, I remind you."

*And this time I was the last. Valentine found his way down here, wearing that mask, and we met again, this time with two wars between us.*

"And you had the row to end all rows," surmised Theta.

*He left at the end of it. He promised to return one day, and then I would know.*

"Know what?" asked Koschei.

*If he came with his face bare, then I would know that he had forgiven me at last. If he came masked, then I would know that he would never forgive me, and we could fulfill our promise to die together.*

"So that's something to look forward to, then," muttered Theta. He groped behind him, hoping to find some hint of a door or a false wall. His fingers touched nothing but damp stone.

*And now here you are, thief. You presume to wear Valentine's mask. Remove it.*

"My only defense against you? No, thanks," said Koschei. "If I must die, I'd rather take you with me."

*So be it.* The serpentine form uncoiled into a slithering length that filled the stone chamber with its alien unreality.

"Wait!" Koschei called out suddenly. "My friend. He has nothing to do with this. Let him go, first."

"What? No --- " Theta's protest was cut off by a sharp thought from Koschei. Shut up. Go home. Tell my family what happened.

Immindiyan considered the request for a few moments, then conceded, *I have no quarrel with him. Go, little bug!*

Space warped around Theta, space and gravity. He found himself sliding away along a newly opened passage. At the last second, he flung his arms around Koschei's legs and managed to grab his friend's ankles. "No! I'm not leaving. There must be some way to fight it..."

Koschei fought to keep his balance. He braced a hand against the wall. "Don't be stupid! I can handle it."

"You're wrong," said Theta in a low voice. His eyes turned towards the serpentine figure. "You think it doesn't want to die, just because you don't."

*Clever little bug*, hissed Immindiyan. *What can you do about it?* Space twisted again, dumping Theta in a crumpled heap at Koschei's feet.

"Not much," admitted Theta. He sat up, wiping mud off his face. "But what did you say? Share the sweet and the bitter, live and die together."

"Fine, yes, I suppose we are, compared to you. So you're willing to murder two children?" Theta rushed the words out, as if that would make them more persuasive. "The great and mighty Yssgaroth, a killer of the helpless?"

Koschei gave Theta a hand and pulled him to his feet, muttering, "You're pathetic."

Theta grinned weakly, but didn't let go of Koschei's hand. "I didn't want to have to explain your death to your father." He turned to face the Yssgaroth. "Well? All of us, or none at all. Which is it to be?"

There was a long silence. Then, *Who wants your company? Noisy nuisances, the lot of you. Get out of here. But leave Valentine's mask with me.*

Though Koschei was reluctant to part with his only effective weapon, Theta eventually persuaded him to peel the mask off his head and set it on the floor in the center of the chamber. The serpentine figure withdrew far enough to allow Theta and Koschei to retreat through the passage. They heard one last parting thought before the Yssgaroth vanished again into the walls, taking the mask with it. *Come see me again in a few thousand years, and maybe you'll be worth squashing then...*

Neither Koschei nor Theta dared turn to look back or answer. They stumbled through the caverns, retracing their route back to the surface. They were never sure, later, if the world they returned to was the same one they had left the day before.

The Academy was as cold and distant as ever, its denizens the same as Theta remembered, yet everyone seemed to look at them differently now. It felt as if something monstrous had followed them home, lurking in their shadows, invisible but subconsciously sensed by those around them. Of those who had once bullied them, only Anzor persisted, but by himself, he was a tolerable misery.

Theta and Koschei never spoke of their expedition to the Stone Garden. Neither returned there, and the memories gradually faded. A few years out of the Academy, their families arranged marriage contracts for them, but not to each other.

"I don't mind," said Theta when Koschei brought him the news. "I know your father doesn't approve of me."

*"No one approves of you, Theta," said Koschei. "I wonder how many strings Brax had to pull to get your bride's family to sign the contract?"

"I didn't ask him to meddle in my life," sighed Theta. "But they're only temporary contracts. For both of us. And then we'll be free. Afterwards. You won't forget me, will you?"

"Never," vowed Koschei. "Never."

Years passed. Everything changed. Theta and Koschei donned new names like masks, masks that made their mutual betrayals bearable. They left their memories and their world behind. Centuries passed. Wars. Time. Anti-time. Through everything, deep beneath the Stone Garden, the Yssgaroth waited.

It waits there still.

Chapter End Notes
So I recently finished watching all 52 episodes of "The Romance of the Condor Heroes" (2014) (I didn't hate it though I thought I would!) and they decided to insert a tragic love story into the background of just about every single character in the older generation. Even the enigmatic Sword Demon Loner-Seeking-Defeat! (Who must have been dead for decades by the time the protagonist learned about him.) Gah! All those flashbacks really killed the pacing, independent of the quality of the backstory.

Anyway, here I am inventing a random tragic love story for a character who appeared in one scene in a story that probably isn't even canon. The whole thing is ridiculous, and I still can't quite make "Death Comes to Time" mesh with any other version of continuity, but I'm writing it into this ("everything and the kitchen sink" is my motto) anyway. Mwah ha ha ha ha ha!
Missy's new vortex manipulator was a sham.

The ancient Gallifreyans had flown their time scaphes through psychic power alone, a difficult and exhausting process. In latter days, only the Sisterhood of Karn still bothered with purely mental transport. Now, in this broken reality, lacking access to modern technology, Missy had reverted to the old methods and harnessed Zagreus as her personal teleportation device.

Missy's "vortex manipulator" bracelet merely streamlined the process, allowing him to slide through spacetime without leaving a catastrophic wave of anti-time in his wake. The Doctor found it disturbingly clever. Teleportation was not anything that came naturally to him. It required a re-alignment of all his mental pathways, dispersing his own identity and leaving him at the mercy of Zagreus. Zagreus, being anti-time and not bound by time or location, could in theory manifest at any point he chose. The difficulty lay in translating their physical coordinates to match that point. The Doctor had to trust Missy to keep Zagreus under control, or they might never exist again.

"It's a risk," said the Doctor. "Your control is limited, or we wouldn't be trapped in this godforsaken version of reality. Why don't we just walk? What's wrong with a bit of exercise?"

"It would take months. Besides, this is a new design and I want to test it." She tapped her bracelet. "Just a short hop to Mount Cadon."

The Doctor threw up his hands in capitulation. "Fine. Just don't blame me if we end up on Skaro again."

"Chance would be a fine thing," retorted Missy. If they could jump a few time tracks and return to Skaro early enough to stop the spread of the Emissaries of Harmony, the universe might still be inhabited at this point. If they could... she would already have suggested it.

The Doctor knew that no matter what she said, Missy didn't find much satisfaction in conquering an empty universe. That was why the possibility of another survivor had immediately appealed to both of them. Even if it was one of the Yssgaroth, the eldritch horrors from Time Lord nightmares.

"Don't be so melodramatic," said Missy. "Now shut up and let me concentrate."

The Stone Garden was a blind spot in their projections, but Missy was able to steer them to a ridge not far away. To the Doctor's relief, they materialized without incident. Once he finished piecing his mind back together again after the teleport, the Doctor found Missy standing at the edge of the ridge, peering down at the landscape below. Fingers of gray stone thrust upwards through a thin blanket of mist. All was silent and still.

"Now that's odd," murmured Missy.

The Doctor followed her gaze, not seeing any cause for alarm. It was a damp, chilly morning at the tail end of summer. Stunted, gnarled trees grew on the ridge, shedding the occasional stray leaf into the breeze. Anti-time trickled through the roots. The Doctor had patched up the largest holes in reality, but smaller rips and gaps were everywhere. He saw no signs of habitation. Missy's resurrected Gallifreyans tended to cluster along the lowland waterways and shorelines.

"Now that's odd," frowned the Doctor. "What's odd?"

"Nature abhors a vacuum," said Missy. "With the Time Lords gone, why haven't the Yssgaroth
broken through and conquered this universe?"

"Oh." She was right. The Stone Garden was a weak point in the barrier between their universes, existing on both sides and belonging to neither. He had come across similar portals here and there throughout the universe. They were guarded by ancient Time Lord warriors whose names never appeared in the Matrix. The Doctor had met one once: General Kopyion Liall a Mahajetsu, a man ruthless enough to destroy seven planets to prove a point to his enemies. But in this corrupted reality, there were no Time Lords, no General Kopyions. With no one to stop them, the Yssgaroth were free to cross over, free to swarm across the stars. Except --- he didn't know whose thought it was, but it blazed clearly in his mind --- except they were wrong. The Time Lords had got it wrong.

"Wrong? Wrong about what?"

"The Time Lords didn't win the war," said the Doctor. He paced along the line of the ridge, no longer seeing the valley below him as another vision filled his mind, somewhere between a memory and a conjecture.

"Of course they did! It was one of the great victories that sealed the foundations of Time Lord civilization," said Missy, quoting what was written in all their history books. She leaned against a tree and regarded the Doctor quizzically.

"No." The Doctor took a deep breath, letting the thoughts fall into place. "It's what we were told. It's what Rassilon told us. But think about it. We all saw how the war against the Daleks went. The Yssgaroth were ten times, a hundred times deadlier."

"Not as many of them," objected Missy. "And they weren't as single-minded as the Daleks."

"Think. In the old days, the Gallifreyan Empire ranged across the galaxy. Then with the advances in temporal technology, they were poised to do their own swarming through the multiverse," said the Doctor. His pacing grew more agitated as his theory gathered momentum. "But what happened after the war? Gallifrey withdrew into itself, making strict laws to only observe, never to interfere. Is that what a victorious empire does?"

"The Time Lord records say that they withdrew in order not to cause harm to lesser civilizations," said Missy. She kicked a pebble over the edge and watched it plummet. "Remember the Minyans, and so on."

"The records! Pack of lies, always have been. Constantly edited to serve the latest propaganda objectives," said the Doctor in disgust. The problem with Time Lord editing was that it acted retroactively, making a hash of linear memories. But some things were always clear. "Did Rassilon seem the type to worry about 'lesser civilizations'?"

"You have a point, there," said Missy. "But he may have succumbed to political pressure from more soft-hearted Time Lords."

The Doctor stopped and looked at her, remembering Kopyion. "No."

Missy raised an eyebrow. "So what are you saying? Rassilon covered it all up? But the Time Lords survived, so how could it have been this devastating defeat that you postulate?"

"The best victory is the one where your enemies never even know they lost. The Yssgaroth are capable of mercy. You remember." Otherwise, the Doctor and Missy would not be alive now. He continued, "They must have twisted history to change the nature of the Time Lords, turning them inwards, constraining their power."
"Maybe," said Missy. "But this universe is free of Yssgaroth. If the Time Lords lost, why aren't the Yssgaroth here?"

"Maybe that wasn't the point of the war." The Doctor resumed his pacing. "Maybe they were trying to keep the Time Lords from invading their universe. In which case we've been wrong about who was guarding the portal from whom."

"You think Immindiyan was our jailer?"

"I don't know." The Doctor grabbed a withered tree trunk and swung around to face Missy again. "Shall we ask her?"

Standing in the cold shadows of the stone pillars again for the first time in millennia, the Doctor began to doubt the wisdom of this expedition. He could sense the warped layers of reality, and he understood the hazards more clearly than he had in his youth. He knew it was reckless of them to add anti-time to the already volatile mix.

"The interesting thing is that it isn't already contaminated with anti-time," said Missy, after checking the readings on her device. "So you're probably right about the Yssgaroth. It's lurking down there holding this place intact."

"Yeah. Let's try to keep it that way," said the Doctor. "There's a chance we'll be able to cross the time tracks here."

The labyrinth was the same and not the same as the one they had once traversed. Perhaps it was their memories that had changed. It wasn't difficult to find their way. They walked in the footsteps of their past selves. The Doctor could see them clearly, two ghostly figures in his mind's eye. He reached out, wondering how real they were, but Missy slapped his hand away.

"Don't touch them."

He nodded. If she could see them, too, even if it was only through his eyes, it meant they were real enough for his touch to affect their timelines.

When they reached the chamber of the Yssgaroth, Missy pulled him back. They waited outside while Theta and Koschei met Immindiyan for the first time. "While" was a nebulous concept in this place, but the arbitrary framework of "before" and "after" allowed them some semblance of sanity.

Then the walls of the chamber shattered into a confusion of space and time. The two ghosts from the past fled, unseeing, rushing right through the Doctor and Missy before the latter two could dodge out of the way. The Doctor shuddered, doubling over with his arms clutched around his torso, feeling that he had been ripped open to bleed into the time winds.

"Follow them!" he gasped, but was unable to move. He collapsed to his knees. "We have to follow them... way out..."

Missy pulled him to his feet, supporting his weight as best she could, dragging him when his legs refused to obey him. They staggered together after the images of their past selves, but the ghosts vanished into the darkness without a trace. She stared after them. "Damn."

With the ghosts gone, the darkness was complete. The Doctor closed his eyes and leaned on Missy until he felt able to stand again (and a little longer after that, as he found obscure comfort in the solidity of her existence.)
"Time and a place, honey," said Missy, pushing him away. Light flared against his eyelids. He opened them to find Missy using her device as a torch. "My preference would be somewhere livelier. Let's see if we can make that happen."

The Doctor nodded, following her back to the chamber of the Yssgaroth. He rapped his knuckles on the wall where it had once appeared. Light lingered in the stone, marking the barrier between the universes. "Hi. Hello. Wall-snake. You still there?"

It did not take long for the serpentine figure to manifest in the glowing wall.

*Little pests. Why have you returned?* The icy voice cut into their thoughts with an edge of annoyance.

"We were bored. There's no one else to talk to on this planet," said the Doctor. Strictly speaking, they could have talked to the new Gallifreyans, but they didn't want to risk disrupting their development.

*That is no concern of mine.*

"Well, see, all this solitude, it makes you think too much," said Missy. "With the Doctor, that means paranoid fancies worthy of the tin foil hat brigade. You're the only one who can settle this." She explained the Doctor's theory about the Yssgaroth victory. "So, any truth to it?"

*How can you think such things?* Space quivered, expanded. The serpentine shape loomed over them, eyes shining with a menacing crimson light.

"It's obvious, once you look at the facts," said the Doctor, who had seen too many glowing red eyes over the centuries to be impressed by them anymore.

*No. How is it possible for you to think such things? As long as no Yssgaroth crosses the boundary, the binding is unbreakable.*

"There's no such thing as 'unbreakable',' said Missy, "especially where the Doctor is concerned. Just ask the web of time."

"Shut up," growled the Doctor. So he had guessed right. Unlikelier things had happened before, but how had they done it? He thought about memetic life forms and conceptual viruses. He remembered the Word Lords and the Land of Fiction. The Never People had dabbled in this kind of manipulation, too. The idea of Zagreus had been planted into Time Lord mythology, trapping the Doctor into a self-fulfilling prophecy. But the Yssgaroth had achieved another level of control. "It's true, then? Your people imposed your rewritten history on an entire universe."

*Better rewritten than erased.*

"More than once," said the Doctor, remembering their first meeting and Immindiyan's claim that Valentine had originated in a different history.

*How is it that you question your own history?* The icy thought stabbed into the Doctor's mind, demanding answers. Thrown off balance by the sudden mental attack, the Doctor's defenses toppled, leaving him spinning in a sea of confusion.

*I am Zagreus. I write my own history.* Anti-time slammed down like a barrier between them. He shut his eyes against the contradictory visions that assailed him, struggling to get a grip on his own thoughts. He could sense Missy calling him back. Calling the Doctor back. He could hear her voice, holding Immindiyan back.
"Touch him again and it's your history that will be erased," said Missy. "Anti-time for the win."

"Don't," said the Doctor, fumbling blindly for Missy, finding an elbow and holding onto it like an anchor. The chaotic visions slowly subsided. The anti-time infection explained why the Doctor was able to see through the Yssgaroth's version of reality. But that Missy had also been able to see... That was worrying. She had spent too much time telepathically linked to him. It couldn't be healthy.

What touching concern, came Missy's sarcastic thought. But it's a bit late to be worrying about that.

The Doctor had kept anti-time from physically infecting her, but if her mind was affected simply from being in contact with him, then that was bad. Very bad. Definitely bad.

Bad, good, bad. You sound like a bloody three-year-old! She slapped the back of his head. I'll be fine, but you need to focus.

"Ugh," groaned the Doctor, opening his eyes a sliver. "Now that we're clear on that point, moving on. Peace in our time, great, brilliant. I won't argue with a beautiful delusion if you've made it into a better truth. I should try it on the Daleks some time."

"No Daleks," Missy reminded him. "No Time Lords, either."

"Yes. Right." The Doctor eyed the Yssgaroth, which had withdrawn back towards its wall. "But you're still here. Guarding the portal to the last?"

I am not your jailer. Guardians were not deemed necessary.

"That's confidence for you," said the Doctor. "Then what are you doing here?"

Waiting.

For Valentine, the Doctor remembered. Then he remembered something else. "Ah. About that. You can stop waiting. Valentine is dead. He ---"

The rest of the sentence was obliterated as Missy took a sledgehammer to his skull. At least that was what it felt like to the Doctor. He sat with his back to the wall, blinking back stars as his field of vision turned to a dark blur. He didn't need to ask. Missy didn't want him to give information away when they could use it to bargain with.

What!? The serpentine shadow flared over them in shocked disbelief. What did you say?

"We'll tell you what you want to know," said Missy sweetly. The Doctor could hear the smile in her voice. "If ---"

No. No bargains.

Space splintered and time slid cleanly into two halves, with the Doctor on one side, and Missy --- elsewhere. He was nowhere at all. A bubble in the void, inside the eye of the Yssgaroth.

Speak. She cannot prevent you. The ghostly image of Immindiyan infiltrated his field of view.

"What is this place? It's not really the void; I can feel the timelines shifted around us," babbled the Doctor, feeling light-headed. The sudden removal of Missy's influence left him adrift in a sea of turbulent anti-time. "Are we inside one of your conceptual constructs?"

Cease your prattle. You will speak of ---
"Shoes --- and ships --- and sealing wax? Of cabbages --- and kings? " blurted the Doctor. Patterns of light and shadow spun around him, making him dizzy. He didn't know if they were real or not. There was no such thing as reality. Perhaps he should consign this creature that presumed to imprison him to the dustbin of bad ideas. It would be easy. He only had to show her...

Valentine.

"Yes, Valentine. He retired to Earth, as so many Time Lords do. I met him there a few times." He remembered it clearly, even though it had never happened. "He was murdered."

**Murdered! How?**

"He was killed by the vampire assassin called Nessican." He only had to *look*, and the scene unfolded before him, though he had not been present at the time.

**A vampire? One of the Great Vampires?**

He could sense Immindiyan watching through his thoughts. "No. Just your common, or garden vampire."

**Impossible! Valentine could have defeated a hundred common vampires.**

"He refused to fight." He heard Valentine's words in his mind: *If there be blood on my sword, let it be my own.*

Valentine! Immindiyan's anguished thought cast a gray haze over the scene that was less than reality but more than memory.

"I can save him," said the Doctor (not the Doctor). He reached through the timelines, almost, but not quite touching Valentine. The vampire and the Time Lord were frozen a fraction of a second before death became inevitable. "I can bring him to you from that moment to this."

**What? What are you saying?**

"If you wish to meet him again, and why shouldn't you? It's easy, it's so easy, and the only thing that stops me is this circlet I wear. Remove it, and I will return Valentine to you," said the Doctor (not the Doctor). She wanted to accept his offer, he could sense it in her thoughts. Yes, say yes, he urged her silently. All she needed was a small nudge...

No! The backlash was immediate and fierce.

The Doctor (not the Doctor) tumbled backwards from the force of her refusal. He shouted curses, but it was futile. He had miscalculated: she had sensed his interference and reacted with an instinctive revulsion. Worse, he had drawn her attention to the control circlet on his head. The Yssgaroth didn't have Missy's precise understanding of its operation, but she understood enough to activate its most basic function.

He fell to his knees, gasping and clutching wildly at his head. Then he remembered himself. "Enough, that's enough. I won't try to force you."

The pain ebbed away, as did the frozen vision of Valentine and Nessican. The Doctor and Immindiyan watched in silence.

So that's how it was.
"Yes," said the Doctor. He slid his hands over his face, not daring to look any further. Even thinking was dangerous. He had not realized until now how much he had come to depend on Missy to keep him mentally stable. He shuddered, terrified by the unwelcome insight. He hadn't even felt himself slip, hadn't noticed when Zagreus hijacked his stream of consciousness.

Valentine broke his vow. He never returned.

"People leave, sometimes," said the Doctor thinly. His hearts were still racing under his veneer of calm. "That's life."

He left his anger behind with his mask. Perhaps it held his love as well, only I never knew. Did he remember me?

"I think so. Yes." The Doctor lifted his head, met the glowing red eyes. "I think, because things had come out so badly for the pair of you, that he tried to help others do better. The humans called him the saint who watches over lovers."

That's something, then. The icy thought came through his head like a weary sigh. And the vampire? What happened to him?

"I killed him," said the Doctor.

And the one who hired him?

"It was a corrupted Time Lord called Tannis," said the Doctor. "I killed him, too, in the end."

There's nothing left, then, not even revenge. I'm not sure whether I should thank you or curse you.

"Neither. I didn't do it for him, nor for you. It was self-defense," explained the Doctor. "People try to kill me. It doesn't always end well for them."

And your friend? She has tried to kill you before. I've seen it in your thoughts.

"Sometimes," said the Doctor. And sometimes she saved him. He needed her now, but that was a dangerous line of thought, even when he wasn't flooded with anti-time. He forced himself into a state of serene acceptance: desire nothing and see nothing the light doesn't freely give you. "It's nothing. It doesn't matter."

You are still together?

"Sometimes," repeated the Doctor. "Other people come and go, but when everything else is gone, here we remain: the same idiot children, standing in the ruins trying to put the blocks back together."

Why have you two wandered so far off the path? This is no reality for you.

The Doctor opened his mouth, then shut it again, not knowing how to answer. Between the two of them, he didn't know who had pulled and who had pushed, that they ended up here in this desolate universe. Missy was the one who had sent Clara to him, but the Doctor was the one who had broken the web of time to keep Clara alive a little longer. Everything after that had been a desperate race to keep reality from disintegrating. It didn't help that a part of him actively wanted to destroy reality.

I will send you back. Consider it payment for bringing me news of Valentine. The grief-tinged thought fell across him, covering his mind in a veil of darkness.

When the Doctor woke again, the world had changed around him. Immindiyan was gone, leaving
only a faint echo in his thoughts. *Farewell, little bug.*

He opened his eyes to find himself on the floor of Immindiyan's chamber, with Missy lying across his legs. She seemed unconscious, but unharmed. He eased her weight away, drawing his legs back until he could stand up without disturbing her. He slipped on his sonic sunglasses to inspect the wall that had served as a portal between their reality and the Yssgaroth universe. It no longer glowed, and seemed as solid as ordinary stone.

"Did you kill her?" Missy spoke from right behind his left ear.

"No," the Doctor answered without turning. He laid his palm flat against the wall. Nothing. "She's gone back home. But she sent us back, too."

"I know. I can feel it," said Missy. "The Time Lords are alive. But until we know the current situation, we'd better be discreet."

The Doctor nodded. He didn't think they were Daleks in this reality, but he couldn't be sure. He stepped back and looked around for the exit. "Come on, then."
"We're on the brink of destruction." --- The Doctor (The Edge of Destruction)

"At least she's not a Dalek," said the Doctor. A short, stocky woman in a nun's robe watched them from the entrance of the Stone Garden. Knowing that she had already seen them, the Doctor shrugged and waved a hand at her.

"So much for discretion," said Missy. "We may as well see what she wants."

"Doctor! Mistress!" the nun called out as soon as they were in range for conversation. "I am Amity, a novice of the Weeping Sisterhood. Grandmother Truthless sent me here to wait for you."

"We were expected?" Missy glanced at the Doctor. "What's your cousin playing at now?"

"Your arrival was foreseen," said Amity.

"Not another damned prophecy," groaned the Doctor. Amity seemed young, earnest, and hopelessly brainwashed. He hoped he wasn't in trouble with the Weeping Sisterhood in whatever version of reality this was. "Listen, you people have to stop with the prophecies..."

"I am to take you in the flyer," said Amity, ignoring the Doctor's protest. "It's over here."

"Oh, in that case, yes," said Missy, smirking. She hooked the Doctor's arm and tugged him towards Amity's flyer. "You know how much you love being shot out of planes."

"We don't know that anyone's going to shoot at us!"

"If they don't, you can always just jump out," said Missy helpfully, "like that time with the Vinvocci ship."

The Doctor ground his teeth and didn't reply. He climbed into Amity's flyer, ducking his head to fit into the cramped space inside. It was an old planetary patrol flyer, salvaged from the military junk yards after the war. The engines were too noisy and the vibrations made his bones ache.

Oh, stop moaning. First you don't like teleportation, and now you're complaining about your bones aching.

You wouldn't have to listen if you stayed out of my head, grumbled the Doctor silently. He gazed out the window as the landscape sped by under them. He didn't know if he was relieved or disappointed when they landed in one piece, with not a single missile fired at them. He had half-expected the army to arrest him upon arrival. Instead, Amity led them across the hanging bridge between the flyer port and the abbey (a good place for an ambush, noted the Doctor automatically) and from there to the audience chamber. A solitary figure wearing the white robe of a senior nun met them there.

"I know the Sisterhood aren't the partying sort, but even so, it seems awfully quiet," said the Doctor, recognizing Truthless, alive again in this version of reality. They had seen no one else here save Amity. "Where is everyone?"

"Concentrating on their duties, keeping the last fragile strands of time intact. Only I have been spared from that burden, along with Amity, who is too young," said Truthless, her voice severe as if she blamed the Doctor for their current plight.
Fair enough, he thought. It was his fault. "Sorry. I was having a bad day. I'm fixing things as best I can."

Truthless was too dignified in this incarnation to roll her eyes, but she pressed her lips together and shook her head. Then she turned to Missy. "As for you, we tolerate your presence for the sake of the Doctor's sanity, but do not overstep your bounds. We have been in contact with the CIA. They've assisted us with certain... precautions."

"They have the Weeping Sisterhood doing their dirty work, now?" Missy chuckled. "Just as well. If they don't give me direct orders, I won't have to waste time and effort ignoring them."

The Doctor didn't know exactly what kind of hold the CIA had on Missy, but he guessed that it dated back to the war, when they had resurrected her (him) as their agent. "They know we're here, then. What about the High Council?"

"The High Council is still in the middle of officially deposing you," said Truthless. The Doctor had technically been the Lord President the last time he had visited the uncorrupted version of Gallifrey. "You know how long it takes them to get anything done."

"They don't want him interrupting the proceedings and ending up president again," guessed Missy. "It's safer to try him in absentia, so they're pretending not to notice him."

"Witless fools, the lot of them," said Truthless. "But it keeps them out of the way."

"Out of the way of what? Why did you bring me here?" The Doctor began to hope that Immindiyan had sent them to their own native reality, early enough in relative time to prevent anti-time from devastating the universe. Nothing so far contradicted his memory of events.

"Come. I will take you to see the other sisters." Truthless dismissed Amity with a nod, then led the Doctor and Missy deeper into the bowels of the abbey.

Cloisters were a recurring motif in Gallifreyan architecture, and the abbey was no exception. Fluted stone columns and arches lined either side of a large interior courtyard, dimly illuminated by bluish globes of light that hung from the ceiling. Ivy climbed up the columns and dipped from the arches, the leaves a dull gray. Under each arch stood a stone nun with her head bowed and her hands covering her face. There were easily a hundred of them, the arcade stretching deceptively as the Doctor and Missy followed Truthless into the cloisters.

The Doctor stopped short, hearts thudding in shock. "Weeping Angels?"

Truthless turned. "No. Members of the Sisterhood, quantum locked as an emergency measure to protect them from the time storms and anti-time contamination. They are anchoring our reality."

Missy ran a finger along a strand of ivy. "Chronophagic slakevine." She sniffed the air. "That's one way to filter out the rotten timelines."

The Doctor stepped under an archway, taking a closer look at the nun frozen inside. He reached out, his right hand hovering half an inch from her head. He sent out a tendril of anti-time, but it split around her, like water flowing around a rock in a stream, shielding the timeline she held behind her. Quantum locked. For the first time, he gave credence to the rumor that the Weeping Angels were a Sisterhood experiment gone wrong. On the other hand, perhaps it was the other way around, and they had learned the trick from the Angels.

The Doctor withdrew, looking towards Truthless. "So it was your temporal weave that kept the web
of time from shattering when..." He broke off, unable to say it.

"When you pulled Clara Oswald out of that extraction chamber and ripped reality apart at the seams, dragging a timeloop across half the universe and billions of years," supplied Missy. "You're lucky someone was paying attention."

"I know." The Doctor lowered his gaze. The Sisterhood had bought him time to patch what he had broken. "Thank you."

"But even quantum locked, we can't hold the chaos back forever. It grows in strength while we weaken," said Truthless.

Of course, thought the Doctor. He had already seen the aftermath of their failure. Immindiyan had given him a second chance. He could only hope to use it wisely and not inadvertently worsen their situation.

Truthless stepped forward again and gestured. "One more thing."

At the far end of the cloisters, one statue stood alone in the middle of the path, not tucked away in an alcove. Unlike the others, her face was exposed, defiantly raised against some unseen enemy, while her hands were fists clenched at her sides. Though she seemed to be gray stone just like the others, her face was alive, constantly shifting its contours before the eye could fix a shape to it. The Doctor stared, struck by its familiarity. He almost recognized it, almost knew who it was.

"She looks upset, almost angry," observed Missy, stepping past the Doctor to examine the figure. "Strange. It's not one of your nuns..."

"It's a TARDIS," said Truthless.

"Ah!" The Doctor circled the statue, not taking his eyes off it, unable to shake the sense of recognition. If it was a time capsule, it must be one of the advanced stealth models developed during the war, able to take humanoid form and blend into an alien world's native population. But there was something off about this one. Something wrong. Something broken.

"Analethic dysphoria," said Missy softly. "When the pilot is lost, the ship is meant to return to its default configuration, but sometimes they refuse. The Time Lords engineered these models with the capacity for independent operation. Some of them ended up as headstrong as that antique of yours. This one is still clinging to a defunct timeline." She looked over at Truthless. "Why don't you put the poor thing out of its misery?"

Truthless shook her head. "We can't. This is all we have left of ---"

"Susan!" gasped the Doctor. He reached for the statue's hand. As soon as he touched the clenched fingers, he knew from the sudden influx of half-memories that he was right. This had been his granddaughter's TARDIS. Even though Rassilon had dispersed her using the Oubliette of Eternity, her TARDIS, symbiotically linked to her, had managed to partially shield itself from the effects. In all the centuries since the end of the war, Susan's ship had never stopped grieving for the pilot that it could neither remember nor forget.

The stone fingers suddenly shifted. They twisted around to grip the Doctor's hand. The head turned to face him, blank eyes filled with a mute appeal. He could sense the ship pleading for, no, demanding his aid. Just as he had recognized something in the ship, the ship recognized something of Susan in the Doctor. She's dead, he tried to tell the ship. Never existed. But he was met with stubborn refusal: the pilot was lost and must be recovered.
"It's more than a memorial," said Missy. "What exactly are you using it for?"

Truthless moved to take the ship's other hand, stroking her arm gently, murmuring a soothing stream of equations until the stone eyes closed and the head bowed. The fingers relaxed, releasing the Doctor. Only then did Truthless answer Missy's question. "Susan was the linchpin of the Sisterhood's great work. When Rassilon had her dispersed, that nearly dissolved the timeline we maintained."

"What timeline ---" began the Doctor, but between one heartbeat and the next, his memories blurred. He didn't know if it was the ship's doing, or something glimpsed through anti-time, but for a moment, he remembered the past as it might have been. "Ah. I see."

"Interesting. So you're using her TARDIS to nail your fabric of time in place. That can't be stable," said Missy, sounding unconcerned about the whole matter.

"No," agreed the Doctor. Then he remembered the way he had once mended a whole planet eroded by anti-time. "Why didn't you use an alternate timeline from the Axis?" It was heartless to think that you could replace someone by patching in a substitute from a discarded reality, but time was heartless. It cared only for patterns, not for the people caught in them.

Truthless shook her head. "There is nothing left of Gallifrey in the Axis. Every possibility was harvested during the war for the construction of the Ninety-nine Gallifreys, and all of them burned."

Of course they had. So many things had burned during the Time War that even now, on a bad day, he could still smell the smoke. He touched the statue gently on the cheek. "So you prolong her suffering for the sake of a dream whose ending you can already see."

"You think we're being cruel?" Truthless gazed at the Doctor wearily, her eyes heavy with her own sorrow. "No. It doesn't have to be a dream. Now that you're here, we don't need an alternative from the Axis. We can re-weave your granddaughter into the web of time using her ship."

After what had happened with Immindiyan, the Doctor was afraid of losing himself if he dared look too deeply into the timelines, but it was the only way, as Truthless had explained. The only way to find enough of Susan to reconstruct her TARDIS in her own image. Linked now to both Missy and Susan's TARDIS, the Doctor had some assurance that they could stop any attempt by Zagreus to meddle. With the input of the Doctor's vision, the ship's features stabilized. Stone softened to flesh, hair, and cloth. Its circuits accepted his memories eagerly, absorbing facts, images, personality.

"That's her," breathed the Doctor. He concentrated, and the woman shifted along her timeline, becoming a child again, then an infant, then an adult again. "Susan."

"Grandfather," said the ship. The voice was perfect in every inflection.

"No. No, you're not her," muttered the Doctor hoarsely. He couldn't bear to meet her eyes, exactly like Susan's, not now that he remembered his granddaughter better than he had ever known her in life.

Don't let your guilt run away with you, came Missy's sharp thought.

"I will have to be her," said the ship. "For all intents and purposes. Or what meaning is there in my existence?"

"I know," said the Doctor, his eyes still averted. He had felt the intensity of the ship's sense of loss, its grief and emptiness when its pilot was torn out of existence. It missed Susan enough to be willing
to recreate her in every detail.

"Go," said Truthless.

The Doctor hesitated, glancing at Missy. The two of them would guide Susan's TARDIS along the thread of her life, from beginning to... an end. And then ---

"She's become a Neverperson," Missy reminded them. "You can't leave her in this reality. You know what happens if she stays."

"I know," said the Doctor again. "I'll deal with her. The same as all the others."

Truthless's face paled, but she didn't contradict him. He had told her about the Emissaries of Harmony in the anti-time corrupted Gallifrey of their potential future. "And after that? After all the rifts are sealed and the web of time is whole again? What about you?"

"I ---" began the Doctor, his mouth suddenly dry. He was still soaked in anti-time, a danger to all of reality. He would need to use it to absorb the paradox that would result from re-inserting Susan back into the web of time, but it could as easily be wielded to break time apart again.

"Don't worry," Missy said to Truthless. She insinuated herself into the Doctor's space, wrapping one arm carelessly around his waist. "I won't let your cousin destroy the universe."

Truthless gave them an appalled look. "No, but..."

Before she could say anything else, the Doctor broke away and strode brusquely into his granddaughter's ship. No, Missy wouldn't let him destroy the universe. As to what she would make him do, he really didn't want to think about that.

"You'll do the right thing, Grandfather," said the ship, in Susan's voice, the sound emanating from a point above the central column of the control room.

"Don't call me that." Her voice brought back too many memories for him here, in this room with its white walls studded with roundels. It was configured to look just like the TARDIS Susan had known in her youth. The Doctor moved blindly to the console and hit the door control, not waiting to see if Missy had followed him inside. (Of course she had.)

"Don't upset our home for the next --- how long did your granddaughter live for?" Missy made a circuit around the central console, inspecting the instruments and controls.

"Not as long as she deserved," said the Doctor, not looking at her. He leaned forward with his hands gripping the edge of the console, head bowed as he contemplated the task before them.

"That's war," said Missy. "But at least this way she will have existed. In a manner of speaking."

"A copy, a replacement, a substitute." The Doctor took a breath, held it, then exhaled, forcing himself to stay calm. "A Susan-shaped space-time event to anchor the Sisterhood's temporal weave."

"I will be a most faithful reproduction," promised the ship. "I won't dishonor her memory, Grandfather."

"I know you won't," said the Doctor. He lifted his head to meet Missy's gaze. "Since most of the work will be done by the ship, she can compress the time element slightly for us."

"Fast-forward through your granddaughter's life?"
"It'll reduce any temptation to meddle. I may have been an awful parent, but even I know better than to try to live my children or grandchildren's lives for them," said the Doctor. This was already a terrible invasion of privacy, but the Doctor did not intend for himself or Missy to retain more than the memories they had any right to.

"A labor of years, in any case," sighed Missy. She sidled up next to the Doctor and fed him a food cube. "At least this TARDIS has a functional food machine."

"Hrmph." But he accepted the cube, letting the flavor seep into his mouth before he swallowed. It tasted of mushroom soup. "Hardly Gallifreyan haute cuisine."

"It'll have to do. Now stop dithering and let's get started." Missy set the coordinates. "We'll need Zagreus to get through the time lock for us."

The Doctor grimaced, but didn't protest. He knew, even when he didn't admit to it, that he had used anti-time to get through the time lock the last time, when he had broken through into the pocket universe where the Master had been trapped. This time, with Missy holding the reins, they would at least have a smoother transition.

"Fine. Do it." The Doctor braced himself. A moment later, he ceased to exist. When he came back to himself, they were already back on old Gallifrey, hidden from the Time Lords of that era, whose technology was not advanced enough to detect Susan's TARDIS. They began at conception, locking the ship into Susan's timeline. Then birth, infancy, and childhood among the Weeping Sisterhood. Then, escape.

"Take me with you, Grandfather," begged the ship, wearing Susan's teenaged form. Through her eyes, the Doctor and Missy saw the gruff, white-haired old man that the Doctor had once been. They listened as he agreed to take his granddaughter with him into exile, stealing a broken TARDIS from the repair docks.

"This is the tricky bit," murmured Missy. One TARDIS walked into another. To avoid dimensional paradoxes and instability, most of Susan's ship's functions had to be deactivated, and the bio-emulation cloak set to maximum compatibility. Only the most advanced stealth models had such capabilities, and then only with considerable assistance from the pilot.

The Doctor held his breath, then released it slowly when nothing happened. It was a testament to Missy's flawless programming. Then again, she had always had a flair for disguises.

She shot him a tight grin, but had to devote most of her attention to the task at hand. They followed Susan's timeline as she joined her grandfather in his travels. Then Earth, and school with the humans. Time sped up again for the Doctor and Missy as the ship got the hang of fitting inside a limited physical existence.

For the Doctor and Missy, months passed in mere days. They watched as Susan left Earth again, protesting when her grandfather kidnapped two of her schoolteachers. More adventures followed, with hostility and suspicion softening to friendship. Not once did anyone question the authenticity of "Susan."

*Is that what you got up to when you left Gallifrey? I had no idea*, remarked Missy mentally.

It was over soon enough, thought the Doctor. He let the ship draw the memories from his mind, recreating what had been erased, line by line. And now he saw through Susan's eyes the locked doors of the Doctor's TARDIS, felt her shock when she realized that her grandfather had left her. After that, a new life on Earth. A son, Alex. Then came loss. But life continued. Later, a brief
reunion with the Doctor as he had been then. And then all her hard-won contentment was ripped away again.

Daleks. You just can't get away from them, can you, Doctor?

The Doctor had no reply for Missy. It was his granddaughter he wished he could speak to, wished he could find some comfort for. He watched his younger self walk away, too stunned by the death of Lucie Miller (another sacrifice on the altar of history) to be able to offer any help to Susan. Except it wasn't Susan, of course. This re-enactment made a mockery of all his wishes.

From Earth to Gallifrey, from civil war to Time War, they continued along the path of Susan's life. Daleks. Rassilon. The Doctor watched helplessly as his granddaughter's life descended into hell. He hadn't been there for her then, and he couldn't be there for her now.

It's done. It's what happened, came Missy's thought, her mental grip tighter than ever. You can't change it, or all of this will have been for nothing. Time would unravel. You know that.

I know, thought the Doctor. It didn't make it easier. He trembled with the need to act, to do something, anything, to steer this version of Susan away from the end that was closing in on them. Time slipped, and he found himself on the floor of the console room, one hand outstretched towards the door control.

"No. No, you can't." Missy held him back. He could feel her breath on his neck, her arms like steel bands around him. She was panting, her hearts beating too quickly. Had they been fighting? The Doctor struggled to remember through the remains of a pounding headache, but everything was hazy. The ship showed him nothing. She must be unconscious, or as close an imitation as made no difference.

Susan died, Missy reminded him. The regeneration was difficult. She needed medical intervention.

Did that account for his confusion? wondered the Doctor. He was linked to the ship, after all. He sagged in Missy's grip, letting her drag him into an armchair. "Then it means she has only hours left. Minutes."

"I know," said Missy. She touched his right wrist. It was only when he heard the click that he realized she had handcuffed him to the chair. "Hush." She did the same to his left wrist. By the time she was finished, the Doctor was securely bound in a variety of straps and shackles.

"What's all this in aid of, then?" At least she hadn't gagged him. He tested his bonds. Anti-time resistant threads were woven throughout. He wouldn't be able to shift them that way. At first he puzzled over why she would bother with physical restraints, when she could use the control circlet on his head. Then he realized: his thoughts were no longer all contained inside his own skull. How much of his consciousness was now entangled with the ship's intelligence?

"Too much. Luckily, we're almost done. Just one more thing," said Missy. She was busy at the controls, having added a contraption of her own to the console. "One chance to get this right. I can't have you jogging my elbow at a critical moment."

The Doctor craned his neck, trying to get a better look. "Is that the telepathic interface you have that hooked up to? What is that thing?"

"I know your mind is overflowing with memories of your dear departed granddaughter at the moment, but do try to keep up," said Missy. "We're here to unerase Susan from history, but if Susan isn't erased, Rassilon will notice. If events change as a result, then history breaks and time unravels,
"Don't you 'yadda yadda' me," muttered the Doctor. "This isn't an American sitcom." But he took her point. She meant to adjust Rassilon's own memories to keep the timeline from diverging.

"Exactly." She kept her eyes on the scanner readings. The exterior time flow had slowed down to match that inside the ship. "Susan" was waking up again. There was her friend, Niall. A telepathic conference. And from there to a final confrontation in Rassilon's office. Word for word, gesture for gesture, the ship matched the Doctor's memory precisely, all the way to the inevitable conclusion. Rassilon activated the Oubliette of Eternity...

...and Missy dematerialized the TARDIS an instant before it was hit. Simultaneously, she activated the telepathic circuits. Niall leaped into the beam of the Oubliette and was forgotten, but Rassilon and Narvin were caught in the ship's psychic field. Not having expected an attack, their mental shields were only loosely held and easily overcome by the combined power of Missy and the TARDIS. A delicate adjustment to their memories and...

"Now!" said Zagreus. The Doctor (who was the Doctor?) was gone as if he had never existed.
"Your old grandfather is going a tiny bit around the bend." --- The Doctor
(The Edge of Destruction)

Chapter Summary

An unhappy reunion (and history repeats itself)

"It is done, as we agreed."

It was Susan's voice, yet he knew it was not Susan. He couldn't remember why he was so certain, but the awareness of that incongruity drew him out of the blank darkness, demanding answers.

"As for your side of the agreement..." Susan's voice continued, trailing off into uncertainty.

The ship! It was her ship, taking Susan's form and speaking with her voice. Why had she done that? There was a gap in the world. He saw it clearly. Susan was. Then was not. He had agreed to bridge that gap. Hadn't he?

"I will bring her to you. Your timelines will join, and she will live again," he told the ship. He opened his eyes and found himself standing in the control room of Susan's TARDIS. Standing? Hadn't there been a chair? Yes. He saw it in the corner, the restraints now hanging limp, empty. He hadn't needed to touch them in order to free himself. He was simply --- elsewhere.

"Will she blame me?" came the ship's plaintive question. "The paradox..."

"Why would Susan blame you for restoring what was stolen from her? What's one more paradox in the grand scheme of things?" He could sense the ship's unease. He smoothed it over with a reassuring thought before withdrawing back wholly into his own mind. He had no more need to hide inside the ship's intelligence. Susan's paradox would be the first of many, now that he was free to do as he wished. Now that there was no one to stop him.

He looked across the console at Missy. She was frozen in place, an almost comical look of surprise on her face. Her lips were rounded, stuck in the middle of saying something. "No," perhaps, or "No, that's not possible!"

The Doctor (not the Doctor) moved around the console to her side. A slight distortion of light betrayed an edge of discontinuous space. The ship had generated a stasis cell around her. It was a standard security feature on all time capsules constructed during the Time War. He reached out to straighten the metal circlet perched crookedly on her head. Underneath it, her hair was still short after a few weeks of growth in the other timeline.

Then he drew his hand back with a gasp. The control circlet. The sight of it was enough to call up old associations in his mind. He was... he was... not Zagreus. He stumbled backwards until he hit the wall, fighting for possession of his thoughts.

"What's wrong, Grandfather?" asked Susan's voice. "Are you all right?"

"It's nothing," he forced himself to say. He pushed off the wall, drawing himself back upright. Vague memories surfaced. The TARDIS medical bay. Programming the surgical bots. Freedom. He shook
his head violently, then turned to the scanner and checked the readings. "Skaro. We're on Skaro."

"Yes, Grandfather," said the ship patiently. "You set the coordinates."

"Of course I did." He fumbled for the door control. "Susan. I have to find Susan. As for you... try to be inconspicuous."

"No one will see me," said the ship. "You will bring her back?"

"Yes, isn't that what we agreed?" The Doctor half-ran, half-fell out the door. He collided with another wall. Letting it support his weight, he turned around to look back at Susan's TARDIS. It had faded into a mere hint of a woman's outline. If he hadn't known to look for it, the shape would have slipped quietly out of his awareness.

"She will live again?" The whisper seemed to emanate from empty air.

"Yes," he repeated, not knowing if he was lying. He felt his way along the wall, the roughness of the bricks restoring his sense of order. He remembered that he had a physical presence in the world. It was right for his motion to be constrained by solid objects; the Doctor existed in a universe ruled by the laws of physics. As long as he held on to that knowledge, he could be the Doctor.

By the time he reached the corner of the building, he felt solid enough to stand without the support of the wall. He peered around the edge and recognized the front of Klade House. Kaled soldiers stood on guard at the entrance, keeping back a loose crowd of journalists and curiosity-seekers. The familiarity of the scene jarred loose another memory: he had seen this before, from a higher vantage point. Shading his eyes against the sun, he peered up at the rooftop he and Missy had occupied. They weren't there. No. The angle of the sun was different. He was here an hour or more later. He was relieved not to be crossing his own timeline; that was one less destabilizing factor to worry about.

He needed to get inside Klade House and the peace conference. That was where the Emissaries of Harmony would be recruiting. (He didn't ask himself how he knew. He didn't dare look again.) He mustered enough concentration to flash his psychic paper convincingly at the guards, who didn't know enough about Thals to realize that he wasn't one. They quickly passed him through, wary of offending a Thal dignitary in the midst of an important diplomatic meeting.

The inside of Klade House reeked of anti-time. The corridors were empty. The Doctor walked down them, flinging each door open as he passed. Nothing. Yet in the back of his head, he knew they must still be there.

_They have been displaced and frozen a microsecond out of alignment._

"Who asked you?" growled the Doctor. Nevertheless, he took out his sonic sunglasses and ran a temporal scan. The displaced staff and soldiers, both Kaled and Thal, showed up as faint ghosts. He thought about trying to bring them back, then decided to wait until after he had dealt with the main problem, that being the Emissaries of Harmony. And Susan. He had to find wherever they were holding their peace conference. He took another scan and found the likeliest location: the oversized chamber up on the second floor.

It was the quietest "diplomatic meeting" he had ever seen.

In fact, the conference room had more in common with the haunted restaurant on Kroseterre than any gathering of the living. He glanced automatically at the security cameras. They were dark, disabled. In any case, none of the security staff were around to monitor them, nor would they have been able to offer any help even if they were available. The diplomats, officials, warlords, and their staff were
arrayed around a large U-shaped table, all of them motionless, their eyes shocked and staring at
horrors that ate away at their timelines.

All except one. A man stood at the head of the table, a strip of white cloth bound around his face,
covering his eyes. He turned unerringly towards the Doctor and said in a voice hissing with anti-
time. "Time Lord. Have you come to join us?"

"Us? What 'us'?" The Doctor stepped across the threshold and let the door swing closed behind him.
"Who are you?"

*I am Hakkendar, first disciple of the new order."

"There will be no new order!" The Doctor (not the Doctor) felt a sudden fury. This was the Thal
warlord who had started the Thousand Year War, started Skaro down the path that ended in Daleks,
always and only Daleks, in this timeline and every other one. He took a step forward, then another.
He slammed his fist down on the table.

A flood of anti-time gushed from the point of impact, whirling outwards to envelop each of the
seated figures. With a thought, the Doctor (not the Doctor) washed the vision from their minds. He
lifted his fist, and the anti-time swirled back into him, leaving behind the seared timelines of the Thal
and Kaled officials and their staff. They slumped forward in their seats, unconscious. Some would
survive. Others would not. He had more pressing concerns.

Hakkendar had withstood the anti-time currents, had forced his way through them to attack the
source. Forgoing the warrior's sword for a battle of wills, Hakkendar gripped the Doctor (not the
Doctor) by the hand as if in greeting. The force of revelation battered at his mind. Hakkendar had
been strong enough to conquer the thirty kingdoms of the Thals and throw all of Skaro into war; his
new devotion to peace was more powerful yet.

"Peace! " spat the Doctor (not the Doctor), who had already destroyed so many like Hakkendar that
annihilation was no more than a thought away. "A peace that's worse than war." And with his next
thought, the warlord was gone. As simple as that. Until---

"Grandfather?" A woman walked through the far wall, her gaze fixed upon the Doctor. Her face
was ambiguous, sometimes that of a woman who had never lived, sometimes that of a woman who
had lived too long. As a Neverperson, Susan gained substance in the real universe through devouring
the timelines of the living. And what better sustenance than Ashildr, who had taken the long road to
the end of the universe?

"Susan." He noted the long dagger she held, remembered its power. He remembered endless
hammering in Rassilon's forge. It was a weapon that rendered physical barriers meaningless; its
merest touch could unravel existence. The memory of that same blade driven into his chest chilled
the Doctor awake. History repeated itself.

"Are you here to kill me?" she asked softly.

"You're the one holding the blade," said the Doctor. "You planning to use it on me?"

Susan cast a glance around the room before returning her gaze to the Doctor. "You've already killed
at least half of the people here."

"This infection must end," said the Doctor. "I'm sorry."

"And Niall? Did you kill him, too?" A hint of anguish crept into her tone.
"Niall never existed." The original Niall had been dispersed, while the version that ersatz-Susan had known was merely a block-transfer echo generated by Missy.

"Grandfather, you know that's not true. Something that has been erased still leaves an impression behind. The soul, the essence, whatever you want to call it, it survives." Susan's eyes pleaded for understanding, for validation. She stood there in front of him, daring him to say that she did not exist. "But you've destroyed even his ghost, because you... you think that's what you have to do."

"You can believe that if you want." The Doctor sighed. Even though he wasn't directly responsible for Niall's destruction, he had played a part in it. And if Niall had survived the temporal blast, it was likely that the Doctor (or Zagreus) would have killed him later. "Stand there in the timeline of the woman you've murdered and accuse me, if you like. We're none of us innocent."

"She was already dead, Grandfather." Susan turned the epithet into her accusation. He wasn't even sure who he was, but it didn't matter to Susan. He knew she would always see him as her grandfather. "How many billions of years did you give her? You can make immortal a Viking girl you've known for barely a day, but you won't lift a finger to save your own great-grandson?"

"It wasn't like that." It wasn't that he had thought Ashildr was more important. It was because his plan had killed her, but he had the means to resurrect her. The Mire medical chip was accessible. And at that moment, the weight of all the deaths on his hands had crushed him. Had broken his self-restraint. He tried to explain to Susan. "Not merely a medical chip," said Susan. "More than that, something that could defy time and entropy past the end of the universe itself. You did that."

"No," said the Doctor, but her eyes compelled him to honesty. "Maybe. I don't know."

"And you couldn't do the same for Alex?"

"No. You think what I did to Ashildr was a blessing? If any good came of it, it was no thanks to me. Immortality is a curse," the Doctor said, not for the first time in his life. "But I'd forgotten, until it was done to me. And then to find Ashildr sitting at the end of the universe, unchanged after all that time. She might as well have been turned to stone..."

"I never asked for Alex to be immortal! Just a little more time, that's all," said Susan. "If you refuse to act, then what can I do but take matters into my own hands? He's my son! And if that isn't enough to move you, what about everyone else slaughtered by the Daleks?"

"Susan, Susan, Susan." The Doctor struggled for words, mentally shuffling through his cue cards. None of them were adequate. "I wish it were that simple. Send out your Emissaries of Harmony! Universal peace!"

"There's been so much war. Why can't we have peace?"

"Because I've seen the universal peace you bring. Total success! Total annihilation!" said the Doctor. He saw the doubt in her eyes. "Don't believe me? I've been there. I can show you if you like."

He was still her grandfather. She believed him enough to drop her mental shields and allow him into her thoughts. Together they relived the Doctor's past few weeks, witnessed the fate of Gallifrey in a timeline corrupted by anti-time. The timeline created by Susan's intervention. At the end, she broke free, flinching away from the Doctor. "No. It can't be..."

"It is the truth," he said, still seeing the potential realities unfolding before them. Here, at this point, this was where it was decided. "It's what you wanted. Isn't it?"
Susan shook her head. She took a step back, away from what he had shown her.


"No!" Susan finally stopped retreating. The vorpal blade glittered between them, the edge sharp enough to cut him out of reality. "Grandfather, no."

He stopped and stared at her, seeing her properly again behind the blade. The other visions faded. "No," he mumbled. "No, I'm sorry, Susan. It takes me like that and I can't..."

Susan slowly lowered the blade. "I just wanted a universe where my son could live. Is that so wrong?"

"No." The Doctor dropped his gaze, unable to argue the point any more. He had nothing to console her with. Except--- "Alex did live. He's restored to our reality, he exists, for the span allotted to him. That's all I could do for him."

"He was so young. The second Dalek invasion should never have happened."

"But it did happen." To think otherwise --- was too dangerous. He continued inexorably, forcing himself to accept it, "Alex died. These are facts."

"It's not fair!"

It was a child's complaint, but it shook him to the core. The Doctor's head jerked up and his hearts stuttered at the expression on Susan's face. For a moment, she had sounded exactly like Bonnie, the young Zygon revolutionary. He opened his mouth to reply. The words died in his throat. How could he give the same glib answers to his own granddaughter?

Susan met his silence with her own silence. Her eyes held him, insisting on justice.

No one can foresee or control all the consequences of their actions, he didn't say. Susan already knew that, but chose to act in defiance of risk. Hadn't she learned that from him? After he had left Gallifrey, the Doctor had begun to interfere in the universe, because evil had to be fought. When had he changed? A good outcome had never been guaranteed. When had he started using that uncertainty to bludgeon people into accepting the status quo? When had he become one of the oppressors?

"Why? Why does it have to be this way?"

The Doctor shook his head slowly. Was it the Time War that had made him so fearful of revolution? To prefer a known quantity of death over the unpredictability of change? On the other hand, he risked the universe for Clara's sake. When had he lost the ability to keep his balance between danger and freedom? Action and inaction? Saving lives and damning them? When had he started reserving the privilege of that choice to himself alone?

"Do you know what the Time Lords did to me?" The Doctor finally broke his silence. "They gave me more regenerations. You're right. It's not fair. I'm not more deserving than Alex."

"You saved Gallifrey," said Susan.

"Too late for you." The Doctor looked away from the pain in her eyes. "If the Master hadn't run. If Rassilon had succeeded in dispersing me in the Oubliette of Eternity. The Cruciform would have worked. Maybe that would have been a better ending to the war."
Susan didn't reply.

The Doctor took a breath, then continued, "But the past is no longer ours. The only thing we have the right to control is what we choose to do next."

"And what's that?"

He didn't look at her. "Susan, give me the blade."

"Grandfather!" protested Susan. "You can't mean to..."

"The blade," he repeated. After a moment, she pushed the dagger, hilt first, into his palm. He gripped the dagger loosely, turning it this way and that, observing the play of time and anti-time over the blade. Its cold balance was a familiar weight in his hand. He glanced up to find Susan watching him.

"There must be some alternative," she whispered.

"No." The Doctor stepped forward, folded Susan into his embrace, held her tightly. "I've lived too long. You don't exist. Both of us are too dangerous to remain in this universe."

He shut his eyes and angled the dagger inwards, resting its point lightly on his granddaughter's back. It wouldn't be difficult, with this blade, to impale both of them on the same shard of anti-time, to cut themselves free of this reality forever. He hesitated. Was there really no alternative?

He could sense Zagreus seething with rage at his decision. Only a constant effort of will kept the anti-time creature in check. If he should slip, the Doctor might never surface again. And a slip was inevitable. Anti-time corroded his every thought. He knew he couldn't hold the monster back forever. Only Missy's circlet could do that. Missy would break free, eventually. If he submitted to her control, he would be as lost to himself as if Zagreus had taken him. As soon as Skaro was secured from anti-time, Missy would use the Doctor for her own ends.

No. There was no viable alternative. There was only oblivion.

"I'm sorry."
"Tartarus has been good to me." --- Persephone (Like Father, Like Daughter)

Tartarus always began with the dry fountain in the dusty courtyard. The Walls of Doubt rose around them in a forbidding stone labyrinth.

"Home sweet home," said Bo, surveying their surroundings. "Hasn't changed since my last visit."

Dagny released their hands and looked around, her nose wrinkling. "Is it always so dark? It's enough to give anyone seasonal affective disorder."

"Your father was never the type to set out a welcome mat," said the Rani, hefting a duffel bag over her shoulder. They had left most of her equipment behind, except for what she could fit into the bag. She took out her smartphone, which she had upgraded with her own custom sensors and controls. She peered at the screen. "Hang on... this is odd..."

"We're in hell: 'odd' comes with the territory," said Bo. "Along with the eternal darkness."

"Or not so eternal." Dagny stared over Bo's shoulder. "What the heck is that!"

Bo turned. A jagged sliver of white light ran vertically through the air, from a point just above her head to nearly the ground. It widened slowly, growing brighter until it hurt to look at. She shaded her eyes with a hand. "Ok. That is weird. Uh... Rani?"

The Rani swiped frantically at her smartphone, her worried gaze alternating between the screen and the line of light. "Shit. I thought I closed it... I did close it. Something latched onto us. It's prying the dimensional rift open again."

"IN-I-TI-ATE E-MER-GEN-CY PLA-NAR SHIFT!" The harsh, metallic voice came through the light in a distorted buzz.

The Rani pocketed her phone. "We can't stay here! Come on." She hooked a hand around Bo's arm, then grabbed Dagny's wrist. Bo allowed herself to be dragged into the labyrinth but Dagny dug in her heels.

"Not in there! There's something in there. I hear voices," said Dagny.

Bo didn't hear anything. She guessed that once you broke through the enchantment, it couldn't affect you anymore.

"We don't have time for this! That's the psychic repellents in the walls. Ignore it." The Rani pressed forward.

"She's right," said Bo. She gave Dagny a shove, then glanced back over her shoulder. The line of light had widened into a rough-edged rectangle. A distinctive silhouette appeared against the light: wide at the bottom, tapering upwards into a domed top, with stick-like protuberances and a single roving eyestalk. She recognized the shape from the Rani's nightmares. She hurried out of sight behind a wall with the others. "Was that..."

"A Dalek, yes," said the Rani. "If they're invading pocket universes now..." She shuddered. "Keep moving. Don't let them see us."

The three of them headed deeper into the maze. Dagny clapped her hands over her ears and her face scrunched up in misery. "I'm not listening!"
"Shhh!" Bo resisted the urge to slap some sense into her sister. She said in a fierce whisper, "Don't shout. You just have to believe in yourself."

"You wish I was never born," wailed Dagny. "You want my mother back. You wish Kenzi was here instead of me."

Bo hustled Dagny along. They were falling behind the Rani. "Look, you can get through this. You're a Valkyrie. Doubt is like your favorite pizza topping."

"That doesn't---" Dagny's objection was interrupted by a sudden chorus of unearthly howls. She dropped her hands from her ears and stared at Bo. "Dogs? Wolves?"

"Coyotes?" Some goblin creature had bitten her the last time she was in Tartarus, but Bo didn't remember any canids. At least the distraction seemed to help Dagny push aside her insecurities for the moment.

"The Doctor mentioned hellhounds," said the Rani, who had stopped to listen. A moment later, another sound cut through the howls. It was a hollow mechanical screech, repeated rapidly, after which the number of howling voices lessened noticeably. "And that's the sound of Dalek energy weapons being discharged."

"You mean like death rays?" wondered Dagny.

"Pretty much death rays, yeah," confirmed the Rani. "One direct hit, and it's curtains."

"Sounds like the dogs are losing," said Bo.

"Teeth versus death rays, you do the math," said the Rani. She set her duffel bag on the ground and knelt next to it, rummaging through the contents. "We have to stop them."

Dagny's eyes darkened and her face turned skull-like. "These are some kind of aliens? We'll see what they fear..."

"Daleks don't doubt," said the Rani, not bothering to look up. "And they aren't interested in sex, either, before you ask. As for your knives, forget it. They wouldn't even scratch Dalekanium."

"So what do you suggest?" asked Bo. "I didn't see any heavy artillery the last time I was in Tartarus."

The Rani held up a small glass vial. "One of the viral agents I was developing right before the Daleks attacked my space station. You just need to release it close enough to their air intake vents and wait. Preferably without getting shot."

Bo took the vial. It contained a cloudy whitish liquid. "Wait how long?"

"Ah. I'm not sure," said the Rani. "It needs testing. And I didn't have time to rig up a delivery system. You'll just have to shake it vigorously before opening it. Then..." She shrugged and mimed flinging the contents into the air.

"Right." Bo took a deep breath, mentally preparing herself.

The Rani scrambled to her feet. "Wait." She produced three more vials and handed another one to Bo and two to Dagny. "I heard at least two Daleks. I hope there's no more than six, because that's all the samples I have." She slipped two more vials into her jacket pocket. "Come on. I think I can keep them from seeing us."
Three Daleks. There were three Daleks. Their ghostly forms glided through the labyrinth, unaffected by the Walls of Doubt. The Rani, Bo, and Dagny tiptoed behind them, wary at first, then more confident when the Daleks completely ignored them.


"Is this one of your Time Lord powers?" asked Bo.

"We're not invisible, just shifted out of phase," said the Rani, sounding irritated and tense. Her forehead was wrinkled in concentration. She had one hand clasped around Bo's wrist and the other hand around Dagny's. "And I can only do this because it's easier in this universe for me to manipulate time."

As they watched, another pack of hellhounds leaped into view, charging the Daleks. They were big and black (naturally), with the speed, tenacity, and brute power of pit bulls. It wasn't enough. The Dalek rays shot out in bursts of glaring blue light that shone through their targets, exposing skeletons for an instant before the bodies fell in charred heaps.

"Damn." Bo felt sorry for the dogs. She shook her vial, then removed the stopper. "All right. Let's do it. In three... two... one... go!"

The three of them burst into motion. Back in phase with reality, and now in close range, Bo could feel the looming menace of the Daleks. She reached up and emptied her vial as close as she dared, practically pouring it onto the metal casing. She saw the Rani and Dagny do the same. Before the Daleks could spin around and shoot, the Rani grabbed Bo and Dagny and yanked them out of phase again.

"A-LERT! A-LERT! WE ARE UN-DER AT-TACK! UN-KNOWN E-NE-MIES MUST BE LO-CA-TED AND EX-TER-MIN-ATED!" the Daleks shouted, becoming ever more hysterical as they searched for targets. "IN-CREASE SCANS TO LE-VEL FIVE."

"Move!" hissed the Rani. The three of them scrambled back behind the cover of the walls. "I don't know what kind of technology these Daleks have. I've never seen this variant before."

To Bo's relief, even when the Daleks started firing methodically at all the walls, the Rani was able to keep them out of harm's way. The Daleks made it almost to the edge of the labyrinth, slowing as they went, until finally they stopped altogether. Trickles of greenish liquid oozed out from their casings. The Rani made them wait for a full ten minutes before venturing back into normal reality. The Daleks were suddenly fully solid again. They didn't react even when the Rani's smartphone flashed as she took pictures for analysis.

"Hmm. It worked. Twenty-nine minutes to complete loss of function," said the Rani.

Dagny poked a cautious finger at the Dalek. "That was easy."

"Don't touch it!" The Rani slapped Dagny's hand away. Then she took a breath, pushing the hair out of her face. "Yes, well, this was just three of them. There's trillions of them out there. They'd let a million die in order to develop a defense, and then a counter-attack."

"The arms race from hell, huh?" said Bo.

"More or less. Speaking of hell, we seem to have found our way out of the maze." The Rani pointed
at a gap in the walls. "I see lights ahead."

"Lights?" Bo moved forward to take a look. Glaringly bright spotlights illuminated a giant hole in the ground. Then as her eyes adjusted, Bo saw the piles of dirt and the crane. Trucks were parked all along around the hole. It was a construction zone. "That's definitely new."

"What are they building?" asked Dagny.

"We won't know until we ask." The Rani hefted her duffel bag onto her shoulder and started walking towards the lights. Ten minutes later, the three of them stared at the billboard.

"'Future site of the Tartarus Grand Central Station and Town Square,'" Bo read incredulously, pitching her voice to be heard over the rumble of machinery. She squinted at the illustration. "Luxury townhomes? High end shopping mall? You gotta be kidding."

"Someone's putting a lot of effort into this makeover," said the Rani blankly. The construction crew, busy at their work, ignored their visitors. "The gentrification of the underworld doesn't sound like something Hades would bother with."

A flash of white blurred past them in a flutter of wings, morphing a moment later into a pale brunette in a white dress centuries out of fashion. "No. It was my idea."

"Hi 'Seph. Long time no see," said Bo. It was her stepmother Persephone, who looked younger than her but was in fact thousands of years older.

"I'm going to kill those augurs." Persephone scowled at the three of them. "No. I'm not having it."

"What?" Bo glanced at the Rani and Dagny, but they looked as confused as she felt. "What do you mean?"

"I am the wife of Hades," said Persephone. "Just because you're his favorite daughter, don't think you can waltz in with your alien friends and take over Tartarus!"

"I don't even want---" Bo began.

"See? I knew it. 'Favorite' daughter, huh? What am I, chopped liver?" interrupted Dagny, resentment bubbling over again.

"Oh, give it a rest," muttered the Rani. She looked at Persephone. "We have no intention of taking over Tartarus."

"Then why did your robots shoot my dogs?" demanded Persephone.

Oh, thought Bo, who then did her best to explain, with the Rani and Dagny chiming in to elaborate. Eventually, they managed to convince Persephone that they were only there to borrow the use of Hades's specialized equipment.

"I couldn't make heads or tails of it, so I had it all put in storage," said Persephone. "Cleared everything out so that I could start new Tartarus off with a clean slate."

"That was quick," said Bo, looking around at the construction site, "considering he hasn't been gone that long. How do you know he won't be back?"

"The auguries say that I will reign over Tartarus for the next age of the world," said Persephone. "That was why when you showed up, I thought---"
"Yeah, no, the whole Dark Queen thing, I'm so over it now," said Bo hastily, giving her stepmother a conciliatory smile. "So... storage, you said. Mind if we take a look?" 

"If you insist," said Persephone. "It's this way." She set off on the path that led around the construction site.

Dagny trotted forward, overtaking Bo to catch up to Persephone. "So where did you get all these workers from?"

"They are shades," said Persephone. "There are architects, builders, construction workers, and all manner of other skilled folk among the dead."

"Cool," said Dagny. "Fae or human?"

"Both," said Persephone. "In this place, I have dominion over them all. Did you think my powers ended at taking the shape of a dove?"

"Hey, no offense, I was just curious. Professional interest, you know, what with me being a Valkyrie," said Dagny. "But we only do warriors."

"Valhalla must be a violent place," said Persephone.

"Surprisingly not," said Dagny. "So what's up with your renovation?"

Bo tuned out the rest of the conversation as Persephone went on at length about her plans. She glanced over at the Rani, who looked lost in her own thoughts. She leaned over and touched her arm, saying softly, "You ok?"

The Rani nodded. "I got the results back from my initial analysis." She gestured with her smartphone. "Those Daleks. They contained Gallifreyan genetic material."

Bo's eyes widened. "You mean...?" She wasn't sure what it meant, but it probably wasn't good.

"They must be converting my people. Either prisoners or slaves or... or Gallifrey is already lost," said the Rani. "I need to talk to the Time Lords."

Persephone's 'storage' turned out to be a double row of shipping containers, and the Time Lord equipment was all packed neatly in one of them. After persuading Persephone to supply them with electricity and tools, the Rani set to work. Dagny soon became bored and wandered off when Persephone offered to show her around Tartarus. Bo stayed with the Rani, supplying moral support and coffee, having found a coffee machine in the tiny office at the end of the row.

They were at it for hours. The sunless gloom of Tartarus wore on Bo's nerves, while the Rani became increasingly worried and frustrated when she could get no response to her signals.

"It's as if Gallifrey isn't even there. But it must be! I've looked at the record of your father's correspondence, and they were happy enough to talk to him," said the Rani.

"Is there some way we can just go and take a look?" suggested Bo.

"Do you see any time capsules around here?" snapped the Rani acerbically. "No. No, I'm sorry. We're trapped here."

"But those Daleks got in somehow," said Bo.
"Damn the Daleks!" Then the Rani stopped. She stared at Bo, her eyes unfocused as she chewed on her lip. "The Daleks..."

They ended up borrowing a few shades to transport the Dalek carcasses to the storage area, where the Rani quickly dismantled them. She combined her salvaged components with parts from Hades's equipment to build something she called a 'dimensional cannon.' "It can propel us between universes. Tricky to steer, but I've set up a biodata link between you and your father."

"Ok, sounds good," said Bo. In her experience, people traveled between planes through mirrors, magic shoes, and near-drownings in bathtubs. So even if it sounded like a carnival ride, she trusted the Rani to make a cannon that could shoot them to another dimension. "When do we leave?"

"In half an hour, after it's done charging up," said the Rani. "Do you want to say good bye to Dagny?"

Bo shook her head. "I'll leave a note. If I tell her in person, she'll insist on tagging along. If we're really going to my father, it's too dangerous for my sister."

It didn't look like a cannon. It was more of a backpack filled with alien technology and hooked up to Bo via a headband fitted with telepathic sensors (according to the Rani). It was heavy enough that she hoped the journey would be quick. The Rani, who had her own bag slung over her shoulder, took Bo by the hand and reached over with her other hand to flip two switches in rapid succession. The darkness of Tartarus gave way to the empty lightlessness of the void.

Bo shot through the void, helpless to control her direction or speed. It really was like being fired from a cannon, she thought, trusting the Rani to have aimed them correctly.

Then everything went white.

They were somewhere again rather than nowhere. Bo's ears popped with the change in pressure. The air smelled dry and sterile. As her eyes adjusted to the light, she realized that she was inside some kind of giant white honeycomb. A continuous low hum filled the lower edge of her hearing. Thrown forward by the dimensional shift, Bo found herself falling onto a waist-high console that formed the central feature of the honeycomb chamber. The Rani in turn collided with Bo, the duffel bag swinging around and sliding off to the ground. On the other side of the console, an older woman stood frozen, seemingly staring at them.

Just as Bo began to speak, a high-pitched whine pierced the air. Time turned to molasses. She and the Rani were caught mid-collision, Bo angled awkwardly in the air over the console, both of them now as motionless as the original occupant of the room. Bo fought down her panic, finding that with effort, she could still move slightly, albeit with excruciating sluggishness. Her fingers tightened around the Rani's hand.

This is the control room of a war TARDIS, came the Rani's thought directly into Bo's mind. Don't let go. As long as you're touching me, the stasis is weakened.

Huh? Bo slowly turned her head to look at the Rani. She tried to speak aloud, but no sound came out. What stasis?

Temporal grace is enhanced in a war TARDIS, explained the Rani. The interior dimensions are not in normal spacetime, but held outside, buffered against time distortion. In a sense, no time elapses while we are here. The TARDIS makes small exceptions to allow its crew to function. That exception can be revoked to create a perfect prison for anyone who violates the integrity of the ship. Meaning
Things must be bad if the Rani had gone into lecture mode, thought Bo. With no walls, doors, or locks, there was nothing to break out of. 'Perfect' prison indeed. But what did she mean about weakening the stasis?

*It's because you aren't from this universe. You carry a tiny bubble of your native time. That's what's allowing you to move and think.*

Ok, that was a start, thought Bo. Now she just needed the Rani to teach her how to operate this thing.

*Isomorphic controls,* came the Rani's glum thought. *Basically a biometric lock.*

Can we get around it? Bo turned her head slowly back to look at the array of unfamiliar controls.

*I'm thinking. No, wait, I know. Move to the right around the console. See if you can touch that plate there.*

Bo followed the Rani's instructions, managing to press three fingers onto the edge of the indicated plate after easing herself around the console as far as she could without losing touch with the Rani. Now what?

*You're very, ahem, persuasive. Use your succubus powers to seduce the ship into cooperating with us.*

What? Bo gaped at the Rani. Seduce the ship? She had always thought that thing with men and their cars was just one-sided anthropomorphism.

*Time Lord tech tends to be more sentient than human tech.*

How could a spaceship even have sex? wondered Bo. Were TARDISes actually some kind of weird space animals?

*It's complicated. Equations are involved. Complicated equations.*

Forget I asked, thought Bo. Luckily her powers didn't require too much in the way of conscious thought. Even so, she had never formed this kind of rapport with a machine before. Not quite a machine. She closed her eyes, imagining the ship in human form. The impression of a woman appeared in her mind's eye. Bo imagined herself touching her, caressing human skin. To her surprise, it actually worked. The atmosphere in the ship took on a distinctly warmer tone. The Rani must have sent some kind of mental command through Bo, as a moment later, both of them were released from their stasis.

Bo straightened, stretching out her cramped limbs. Then she remembered the other prisoner. She nodded her chin at the woman, "What about her? Should we get the ship to release her, too?"

"Ah. Not quite yet," said the Rani. She followed Bo's gaze to frown at the frozen figure. "That's your father. Um. Mother now? English is not good with these nuances."

"Shit! Are you sure?" Bo leaped back in alarm. The woman (Hades?) did not react in any way. "Why is she stuck in the stasis thing? What's with the ring on her head?"

"Maybe the Doctor trapped her here," said the Rani. "They've been playing these stupid games since they were children. They've never grown up --- they just play for bigger stakes now."
Bo gave Hades a sidelong glance, hoping she couldn't hear them. Bo wouldn't put it past her to be faking the stasis.

"Damn." The Rani thumped the console in irritation. "The ship won't let me into its systems. I can't even get the scanner to work to see where we are."

"We are on Skaro," said a female voice, the sound emanating from a point above the central column of the console. It continued, rattling off a string of numbers that meant nothing to Bo.

"Skaro!" The Rani sounded both startled and frightened at the name. "Why are you here? This is too far back in the timeline. What's happened in the war? Did the Time Lords send the Master here? Why have you imprisoned her?"

"The war is over," said the voice. "Gallifrey endures, hidden at the far end of time. The Daleks live on, but the war is locked. We are here to reweave a thread that was lost. As for the one you call the Master, Grandfather asked me to hold her until his return."

"Over!" The Rani glanced at Bo, a look of relief spreading over her face. She murmured, "Sounds like a stalemate." Then worry creased her forehead again. "But we met Daleks containing Gallifreyan genetic material..."

"There were such in another timeline," acknowledged the voice, "but they were destroyed, except for a few that Grandfather cast into the void. Those may have escaped to the current layer of reality."

"'Grandfather'? Hang on, I thought you were the ship," said Bo. "How can you have a grandfather?"

"In my memory, he is 'Grandfather'," said the voice of the ship. "Others name him 'Doctor'."

"Ah," said the Rani. "But he's always been attached to his wreck of a Type 40. Did she finally give up the ghost?"

"Data unavailable," said the ship.

"Never mind. Bo, it's probably best if we just stay out of their way. Your father and the Doctor pretty much cancel each other out, but heaven help anyone caught in between," said the Rani, speaking in tones of weary experience. She flipped one of the switches on the console. Nothing happened. "Oh come on. Just let us out. If the war's time-locked, we should be safe enough on Skaro in this era."

"I will not permit your interference to endanger the mission. You will wait inside until Grandfather returns," said the ship.

"Please? Pretty please with sugar on top?" tried Bo. "We don't even know what your mission is. How could we endanger it?"

The ship repeated her refusal. Bo glanced at the Rani, hoping she had a better idea.

The Rani didn't answer aloud. She guided Bo back to the console, taking her hand and placing it squarely on top of the same plate as before. A whisper of thought came into her mind. *The same as before, only more so. If you drain enough energy out, I'll be able to force the door open.*

Bo raised her eyebrows at the Rani, then shrugged and gave it her best shot. She had never fed off a spaceship before. It tasted nothing like a fae or a human, and she felt that most of the energy leaked out of her hold, but she pressed on, past the point where a mortal would have died. She hoped the ship was less fragile. The lights flickered and dimmed.
The Rani knelt by the doors, her duffel bag open at her side. She removed one of the circular panels from the wall and began fiddling with the exposed circuits.

Bo began to feel dizzy from the strange energy, not quite *chi*, flowing through her. Just when she thought she would pass out, the lights dimmed even further. The constant background thrum ceased. She thought she heard someone say, "No! That's not---" The voice cut off abruptly, but Bo already knew it wasn't the Rani or the ship speaking. She looked up to see the previously-paralyzed woman step free.

The stunned expression on her face had turned into a confident smile. She shook her head lightly, lifting a hand to catch the metal ring as it slid off. She saw Bo looking at her and said, "Bo, sweetheart, what a delightful surprise. Do I have you to thank for freeing me?"

Bo was still too dazed to manage more than a feeble snarl in response. In the back of her mind, she wondered why Hades now had a Scottish accent.

Her father (mother) chuckled at Bo's reaction. Her eyes flicked over the assemblage on her daughter's back. "A dimensional cannon? Surely you didn't rig that up by yourself?" She glanced around the room. "Rani. A fortuitous intrusion."

The Rani looked up, a resigned grimace on her face. "Master."

"I'm going by 'Missy' now." She strode over and leaned down to peer at the opened roundel. "Here, let me do it, or we'll never get out of here before the ship recovers its wits."

Bo moved forward, but the Rani shook her head at her. Right. At least her father --- mother --- Missy --- whatever --- wasn't trying to kill them. Yet. In fact, she was working with an urgency that belied her tone of amused indifference.

"It's a war TARDIS," said the Rani defensively. "They have extra security --- is the war really over?"

Without looking up, Missy waved her left hand ambiguously. "Close enough. Is that what brought you out here? Were you worried?"

"The Daleks," said the Rani. "I wanted to assess their current status."

"They're a swarm of tin cockroaches, scurrying everywhere they're not wanted." There was a whir, then a click. "Aha. Bo, dear, don't just stand there. Go pull the doors open."

Bo glanced for confirmation from the Rani, then moved to the supposed doors. They lacked proper handles, forcing Bo to pry them open with her fingertips around the edges. The Rani stood up to help. The doors were heavier than they looked, but as Bo was still pumped up from absorbing the ship's energy, she had plenty of strength to spare. A moment later, all three of them were scrambling out the opened doors. Bo and the Rani, slowed by their baggage and uncertain of what they would find outside, lagged behind Missy.

Bo blinked as she stumbled into a sunlit alley. She glanced back over her shoulder, but the doorway had vanished into thin air. On the other hand, the brick wall now in front of her looked so ordinary that she wondered if she had just walked out of a dream.

"So, we'll just leave you to it and be on our way," the Rani was saying to Missy.

"I don't think so," said Missy. Bo saw her point her phone (or was it a small tablet?) at the Rani like a weapon. "I have other business here, and the last thing I need is you two nicking the TARDIS while
"I'm distracted."

"I wouldn't dream of it," the Rani assured her.


The Rani sighed, rolling her eyes. "Come on, Bo."

Bo nodded, knowing the drill. They would wait for a better chance to make their escape. "What do you need us for?"

Missy didn't answer.

"Let me guess," said the Rani. "Cannon fodder? Bait? Or what have you been doing this far back in Skaro's history?"

"Just walk," snapped Missy, obviously on edge. "There should be a back door around here somewhere..."

They followed the wall around the corner to the rear of the building, where Missy found a loading dock. It was guarded by two soldiers in strange uniforms, but even as Bo wondered if the uniforms were real (were they truly on an alien planet or was it a trick?), Missy had reduced the soldiers to ashes with two quick shots from her device.

At that point, Bo decided to make a run for it while Missy was occupied with the locked door, but the Rani held her back. "Something's wrong here. We need to find out what --- ignorance could get us killed. The temporal currents are distorted. It's like a bad taste in the back of my mouth."

Bo opened her mouth for a rebuttal, but it was too late. Missy had already wedged the door open and was waving them inside, the weapon still in her hand.

"You can blame the Doctor for the time distortion," said Missy as they stepped through the doorway. "The Doctor, or Zagreus, whichever one he thinks he is at the moment. Possibly both, in which case he'll be too busy arguing with himself to actually do anything. But if he's Zagreus, we're all in trouble."

"Zagreus?" The Rani's tone was skeptical. "He said that before, but most of what he says is just random bullshit. Zagreus is a nursery rhyme! Don't tell me the Doctor bamboozled you into believing he's the boogey-man?"

Missy laughed shortly. "Zagreus is real enough now. And if we hurry, we may be in time to prevent him destroying the universe."

"Wait, what?" Bo was depressed to find that she believed Missy. After having seen her uncle (aunt) Zeus nearly bring about the end of the world and been instrumental in Hades's global takeover bid, she was no longer surprised by apocalyptic threats.

"What kind of doomsday weapon did you get your hands on this time? You guys seriously need a new hobby," said the Rani. But Bo could sense the uncertainty beneath her flippant words.

"He is the weapon this time." Missy glanced at her device. "Upstairs conference room!" No longer bothering with Bo or the Rani, she charged upwards, taking the stairs two at a time. Bo followed close on her heels, catching the conference room door before it slammed shut in her face. She held it open, and only after the Rani and her overloaded duffel bag had squeezed through the doorway did
Bo follow her inside.

A few dozen unmoving figures were slumped in their chairs around a large U-shaped table. The Rani was already scanning the nearest with her phone, frowning worriedly. On the far side of the room, Bo saw the Doctor, his back turned towards them, holding a woman Bo found vaguely familiar but couldn't put a name to.

"You idiot, what are you doing, don't you dare---" Missy slid to a halt in the center of the room. From somewhere, she had conjured up the music box that she had once given to Bo. Now Missy set it down on the table and began turning the crank.

The Doctor spun around with a strangled gasp, staring in shock at Missy. He had a long-bladed knife or dagger clutched in his right hand. Behind him, the woman cried out once, her voice strangely distorted but otherwise identical to the ship's voice. "Grandfather!"

Then she dissolved into smoke and was gone.
"I hope I'm never like that, pretending not to care." --- Susan (The Dalek Invasion of Earth)

Chapter Summary

Having foiled the Doctor’s ragequit attempt, we go in search of an actual ending.

He recognized the distinctive temporal harmonics at once. It sang through the blade he held. He had one chance, a tiny sliver of a moment in which he could escape the music box. He could be --- elsewhere. Out of range. Himself alone, or together with Susan. Instinct told him to run. Always run. No matter what decision he had made the instant before, now was different. Now was the moment to run away.

He didn't run. The moment passed.

He felt his granddaughter disintegrate, time and anti-time coming apart. The piece that thought of itself as Susan was drawn inexorably into Missy’s music box. The particles that had once been Ashildr shivered apart into smoke, then nothing identifiable. He turned, wanting to tell Missy to wait, to give them more time, but nothing came out except a strangled gasp.

"Grandfather!" came Susan's last desperate cry before the box took her.

He couldn't help her. The anti-time was being drained out of him and he didn't know how much of the Doctor remained, how much had been distorted by the anti-time. He fought to keep his balance, feeling lighter and heavier simultaneously. The crushing burden of anti-time had been removed, but the pull of gravity took on a nearly-overwhelming reality.

Subjectively, he had been living a hybrid existence for years. Objectively, it had only been weeks, perhaps months, but it was time enough to erode his adherence to the normal strictures of physical reality. Now it all came crashing back on him. He swayed, unable to distinguish up from down. He stumbled forward into the table and gripped its edge. He closed his eyes, concentrating on his breathing. In, out, air untainted by anti-time, the moments marching one after the other in strict order.

He felt himself to be a hollow shell, a Doctor-shaped hologram, too exhausted to even stand up anymore. Missy caught him before he hit the floor. She eased him to the ground into a sitting position, and he wondered why she bothered. She was happy enough to watch him fall from far greater heights. Then he remembered that she was no longer linked to his mind. He said aloud, "Why?"

"You asked me once whether I could kill my own daughter. That's the wrong question," said Missy, keeping a steadying arm around his shoulders when he wasn't sure if he would fall over. "The question is, can I stand by and watch you kill your granddaughter?"

"She's already dead," said the Doctor, his eyes still shut. The last thing he wanted to see was any sympathy on her face. Not when she had been right, and he really was just like her. How much did their motivations matter in the end? "This was an anti-time ghost."

"You can make that distinction," said Missy, "but do you really believe in it?"
The Doctor couldn't answer. After awhile, Missy slid something metallic into his free hand, the one not holding the dagger. Was it --- he opened his eyes to check. It was the control circlet. Missy shifted away and stood up.

"Chalk it up as a learning experience," she said, stooping over to kiss him on the forehead. Then she ruffled his hair and stepped back, smiling slightly.

The Doctor blinked up at her. "Giving up your plans of universal domination?"

"It was too easy," said Missy. "Anyway, anticipation was the fun part. Everything else is just work."

"You've called off the apocalypse, then?" The Rani was watching them from the other side of the table. She gestured at the dead and half-dead figures scattered around the room. "Is this the extent of your fun and games this time around?"

The Doctor winced. It was not a good sign when the Rani, of all people, claimed the moral high ground. Then again, perhaps she had changed. He looked over at Bo. And what did it mean if the Master's daughter turned out to be a good influence on someone? While his own descendants... he didn't finish the thought. Aloud, he said to Missy, "I take it they released you? How'd you manage that?"

"Total accident," said Bo, glaring at Missy.

"Is that a dimensional cannon? Don't use those, they're bad for the environment," said the Doctor, still trying to put his mind back together. He took out a handkerchief, wrapped it around the vorpal blade, then stuffed it into a pocket. As for the control circlet, a quick blast of his sonic screwdriver reduced it to an inert, shiny ring.

"Our options were limited," said the Rani. "And it's the only way for Bo to get home, unless you're offering us a ride?"

The Doctor looked over at Missy. "You're her parent. Isn't it your job to drive your kids around?"

"She wasn't exactly a soccer mom," said Bo. "I grew up with a human family. All I got from Hades was lies, manipulation, trauma, and murder."

"And the opportunity to rule the world at my side," Missy reminded her.

"No thank you, Darth Vader," said Bo. She looked around the room. "What the hell is going on here, anyway? What happened to these people?"

"Their timelines are irrevocably mangled," said the Rani. "There's nothing I can do for them. The ones who survived will have holes in their lives."

"Yes. And they won't be the only ones. There is still anti-time contamination elsewhere on Skaro," said the Doctor. Holding onto the edge of the table, he pulled himself to his feet. He headed for the door, wobbly at first, but he quickly recovered the knack of walking without the burden of anti-time affecting his steps.

Missy scooped up the music box under her arm and followed him. "About that. The ship is being difficult. I can't remember all the details... it seems someone saw fit to meddle with my memories..."

"You know why," said the Doctor. His granddaughter still haunted his thoughts, even after he had erased everything that he ought never to have been witness to. He didn't remember, but he must have used the augmented telepathic manipulator that Missy had installed on Susan's TARDIS. The recent
past was a blurred tangle of timelines and paradox. He headed down the stairs and out the back door, vaguely aware of the others trailing along behind him. His mind felt fragmented, incomplete, with thoughts going missing and unthought.

"Grandfather." Susan's voice struck straight at the missing part of his mind. It demanded resolution.

The Doctor stopped short. Susan's TARDIS stood at the heart of the paradox. No wonder the ship was "being difficult." Her timeline was painfully knotted, threaded back and forth through itself. Zagreus had promised... what had Zagreus promised? It didn't matter. The Doctor opened the door and stepped inside, only to find the console room dim and cold, running on emergency power. He checked the instrument panels. "She's barely holding together. If I had..." He glanced back at Missy, eyeing the music box speculatively.

"No." Missy tucked the music box away again, out of sight. "If you start acting like some kind of anti-time junkie, I really will have to shoot you."

"Grandfather. Have you brought Susan back to me?" The ship's mournful query cut off the Doctor's irritated retort.

"No." The Doctor kept his voice quiet. He soothed the ship as best he could, projecting whatever calm he could manage. He set new coordinates. "I'm sorry. Susan can never come back. Her timeline ends here, with you."

"Me?" The ship's voice was faint. "But you said... you promised..."

"I can't. I can't always keep all my promises," said the Doctor.

"Now there's the truth," muttered Missy.

"Shut up," hissed the Doctor between his teeth. He checked the ship's current power levels. "You will have to anchor Susan's timeline, a fixed point to establish her existence. One trip. You can manage one more trip."

"Where?"

"Home." He set the controls. "They will take you into their care." He glanced at Missy, then walked out of Susan's TARDIS for the second and last time.

"Home?" asked Missy in his ear once they were outside.

"The Weeping Sisterhood were the last family Susan had," said the Doctor. He turned around to see the ship shimmer, then vanish, all without a sound. "They have the power to resolve the paradox and safeguard her timeline."

"Leaving us without transport?" This time, she spoke loudly enough to be overheard by the Rani and Bo, who had not risked entering Susan's TARDIS again. "

"The Doctor wouldn't do that unless he had a backup plan," said the Rani. "Isn't that right?"

The Doctor rolled his eyes. "Well, there's always my TARDIS, of course. Come on, then. I feel like I'm running a taxi service here."

"Does that mean I can stop lugging this contraption around? It's heavy," complained Bo, plucking at the straps of her backpack.
"No, you can't leave that on Skaro," said the Rani. "The Kaleds shouldn't have access to anything near that level of technology yet. Think of the damage to history..."

"Speaking of damage to history, what about a room full of dead diplomats?" Missy looked into the distance, presumably calculating the changes to the timeline.

The Doctor did much the same. His grim conclusion: "Each side blames the other for the terrorist attack. The Thousand Year War starts here. We all know where it ends."

"Yes." Missy glanced at the Rani. "And you can count yourself lucky that you synchronized your timeline to us here, far enough ahead to miss the nastiest bits of the Time War."

"It'll make getting to the other universe easier if I don't have to break through the time lock," said the Doctor. "But first we have to settle things on Skaro."

It took a few long, dull weeks to get rid of the last traces of anti-time and to make sure that all the temporally-shifted victims were restored to normal reality. The Doctor withdrew into a depressed silence as he rounded up the last remnants of Susan's meddling. Meddling which, ultimately, he had enabled.

Missy tried to console him privately; he stole the music box from her pockets and hid himself in the Zero Room. He set the box down against one wall and sat on the floor across from it, staring at it morosely. Did he dare release his granddaughter's ghost? In this place, it was safe. Relatively safe. Slightly less risky. Stupid and insane.

So he simply sat and kept it silent company. What was she thinking, as she wandered the dim corridors of replica-Tartarus? How much did she blame him? Would she ever forgive him? What was he going to do? He couldn't keep her imprisoned forever --- it would be cruel. Disperse her into the void of the other universe just as he planned to do with the rest of the anti-time they had collected? Then he remembered that the Matrix was the traditional repository of dead Time Lord minds.

The door to the Zero Room opened, admitting an annoyed-looking Missy. Her expression softened as she took in the scene. "Oh, Doctor... what are we going to do with you?"

"The question is, what are we going to do with Susan?" said the Doctor. "I can't put her in the Matrix. Her existence, such as it is, is a breach in reality sustained by anti-time. It would corrupt all the other minds in there."

Missy picked up the box and sat down across from the Doctor. "There are better places to spend eternity than the Matrix. I've created some of them myself."

"What?"

"I am the god of death, you know." Missy favored him with a smug smile.

He gave her a disbelieving look. He had met plenty of so-called gods in his time, and she was hardly...

"Oh, again with the eyebrows," said Missy. "I was there for centuries. You don't think I just sat around cackling evilly with a cat in my lap, do you? I built a whole post-mortal parapsychic mythscape, complete with arcane rules, ancient maps, and enigmatic oracles."

"Really."
"I'm not you, Doctor. You'd just glue some cardboard boxes together, tack on a few sticky notes, and call it a day," said Missy. She ran a finger along the edges of the music box, and the Doctor had to admit that it was beautifully designed and constructed. "I put a lot of work into the afterlife."

"And you so well known for your benevolence," said the Doctor. It was true that she had done better than Omega (who had been similarly trapped). He supposed the key was to make the world self-organizing and capable of evolution, rather than trying to sustain everything through a single megalomaniacal mind. The result was a universe just as real as the one outside.

"I had to make some parts of it good for the evil parts to be meaningful," said Missy.

The Doctor was dubious. Didn't that argument usually go the other way around? "What exactly are you suggesting?"

"Valhalla."

The Doctor felt an instant revulsion. "Soldiers. Warriors."

"Maybe. The Valkyries were created to harvest souls from the battlefield, but you can also say they take them away from the battlefield," said Missy. "In Valhalla they find freedom from war. Enemies eat at the same table, because who understands you better than your enemy?"

"Huh," scoffed the Doctor.

"At least she wouldn't be alone. It's almost Earth. Doesn't she like humans as much as you do?"

The Doctor sighed. Maybe Missy's good intentions were sincere, for once. "I will suggest it. If she agrees..." Then he shook his head. "Wait. No. You had me going for a moment there. You actually created Valhalla to collect minds with military experience for your army of zombies, didn't you?"

"Well, maybe... a teensy bit..." Missy looked sheepish. "But I never got around to it, and meanwhile it's all been administered by the Valkyries. They're under the impression that it's meant to be some kind of heaven, and belief is a powerful force."

"I know," said the Doctor. "All right. Next stop, Bo's world."

"Oh, are we calling it 'Bo's world' now?" Missy said snippily. "After all, I only created and populated the place."

"Mostly a copy and paste job using an existing planet," said the Doctor.

"Yes, but I was still responsible. What does Bo have to do with it?"

"She was born there. The inhabitants of a world are the ones who give it meaning." The Doctor lifted the music box from Missy and headed back into the corridor. "Come on."

The Doctor returned to the primary control room to find the Rani and Bo peering intently at one of the display screens on the console. He had set the controls to isomorphic, but they had somehow coaxed the TARDIS into disgorging the contents of her databanks, or at least the portion relating to - -- the Doctor squinted at the screen and recognized...

"Miasimia Goria?" he said aloud.

Startled, the Rani hit a button and the screen went blank. "Idle curiosity. I wondered if there were any survivors."
The Doctor shook his head. He didn't need to check. He knew all the worlds destroyed in the war. At one time, he had looked them up obsessively. "I'm sorry."

"It doesn't matter," said the Rani, but when Bo put a comforting arm around her, the Rani's face betrayed a hint of regret. "We're going back to Tartarus?"

The Doctor nodded. It was the most accessible layer of the pocket universe. He set the coordinates. The ride was smoother than his first trip, when he had needed to cross timelines and a time war to reach the Hades version of the Master. This time, he skimmed over the surface and materialized the TARDIS near the place where he and Hades had met.

The Doctor was surprised to find the area much changed, with an enormous hole in the ground where the dark hotel had once stood. He stared at it in bemusement, not taking any notice when Bo and the Rani quietly slipped away.

"She's re-decorating!" said Missy.

"Let me guess: you don't like it?" said the Doctor.

"A little garish." Missy nodded at the illustrations on the billboard.

A white dove swooped down to land on top of the billboard. It cocked its head to glare at Missy with a beady black eye.

Missy grinned. "Persephone. Keeping busy, I see."

"Persephone?" The Doctor eyed the dove curiously.

"My wife," explained Missy. "Technically, ex-wife. The contract ran out ages ago."

"You married a dove?" The Doctor was incredulous. He raised his hands and mimed wings. "With the flapping and the cooing and..."

Missy clouted him irritably on the chest. "Shut it. At least I never married my number one fan."

"That's because you don't have any!" The Doctor dropped his hands, then said, "Besides, she wasn't my number one fan. She was trying to assassinate me."

"Same thing," said Missy. She looked at the dove. "Be a dear and fetch us a Valkyrie. Chop chop!"

The dove cocked its head the other way, giving them one last look before flying off again in a noisy flutter of wings.

The Doctor didn't wait for its return. He went back inside his TARDIS and hooked the music box to a teleporter, the setup an improved version of what he had used before. He began the process of beaming out the particles of anti-time out into space, in the far reaches of the pocket universe where their corrupting influence was neutralized. Soon only the Neverperson image of Susan remained inside the music box.

Well. No use putting it off. The Doctor opened the panel on the box that would release her. He leaned against the TARDIS console, facing the central column. Not looking behind him, where he knew...

"Grandfather," said Susan. "I thought you were going to---"

"I changed my mind," he said, before she could finish that sentence.
The silence stretched between them, until Susan broke it again, asking, "Where have you taken us?"

"Somewhere safe. Somewhere you can --- exist." He reached for the scanner control. Images of Bo's world flashed up on the screen. He stumbled through an explanation. At the end, he only dared a quick glance at her to gauge her reaction.

"Exile to a pocket universe."

"It's very like Earth. Didn't you always like Earth?" said the Doctor in a pleading tone, begging for her understanding.

"An Earth full of strangers." Her tone said that he understood nothing.

"They're only strangers until you meet them," said the Doctor. He suddenly became almost manic, rushing towards the door. "Come on, Susan, I'll introduce you."

He found a small crowd standing outside the TARDIS. Missy, of course, along with Bo and the Rani. Bo's sister Dagny had joined them (the Valkyrie, remembered the Doctor), along with another woman. Looking carefully, he recognized the dove in the woman: Persephone.

"Hello, I'd like you all to meet my granddaughter, Susan," said the Doctor. "Susan, they're practically family. This is Bo, and this is Dagny, they're Missy's daughters. That's Persephone, her wife. And that's the Rani, we were at the Academy together." He pivoted in a half-circle, risking another glance at Susan. She lingered by the TARDIS door, a wary look on her face.

"Nice to meet you," said Bo, and Dagny followed suit. The Rani and Persephone each nodded stiffly.

"Likewise," said Susan faintly. Then she looked at the Doctor. "It's no use. I'm dead. Perhaps oblivion would be better. I think you know that."

"No, don't say that," said the Doctor, but he couldn't meet her eyes. For once, there was no immediate crisis, nothing to distract him from saying what he needed to say. If he only he knew what that was. "Please. Give life another chance."

"I'm so tired, Grandfather." Then, after a long pause, "They're all dead."

He didn't have to ask who she meant. By now, he knew all too well how many people she had lost. Too many, the same as him.

"Susan, right?" Bo broke into their pained silence. "Listen, I know it's hard. She --- Missy --- told us a little bit about you, what you've been through. She asked us to try to help you."

At that, the Doctor cast a startled glance towards Missy, but her expression gave nothing away.

"What would the point?"

"Maybe that's how it seems now, but in time, you might see it differently." Bo took a step closer, reached out tentatively for Susan's hand. "Come on. We can walk a little." She looked at the Doctor, then back at Susan. "Let me tell you about my grandfather. He didn't even tell me who he was at first..."

The Doctor watched as Bo persuaded Susan to accompany her, away from the TARDIS, away from the Doctor himself, and onto one of the gloomy trails that crisscrossed Tartarus. After a moment, Dagny followed after them. When the three were out of earshot, Missy came over to rest a hand on
"She's good at talking to people," said Missy. "And Dagny... Dagny is even younger, but she has potential."

The Doctor stared after Susan, not answering.

Behind them, the Rani was making awkward conversation with Persephone. "So... you two never had any offspring together?"

"No. He was too paranoid to allow it," said Persephone, banishing that topic of conversation with cold finality.

"Right. Never mind." Another pause, then, "So, renovation. Rebuilding. That's a thing, I suppose..."

The Doctor tuned out the rest.

"Let her go, Doctor," said Missy, so softly he wasn't sure if she had said it aloud or only thought it. "Whatever she decides, let it be her decision this time."

Hypocritical of her to say so, considering how many people Missy had hypnotized into obedience or simply murdered, he thought, not bothering to shield himself.

_Because I don't care, but you do. Even after all this time, it still matters to you, being right. And you know it's wrong to deny others their freedom of choice._

And why would she care what mattered to him? Whether he was right or wrong? The Doctor turned to ask her, but she shook her head and moved away.

"You know why." She stepped back into the TARDIS. "I'll wait inside." She blew a kiss to Persephone. "Have fun being the Queen of Hell. Toodle-oo!"

Without really thinking about it, the Doctor aimed his sonic screwdriver at the TARDIS and activated the navigational lockdown. Well-intentioned or not, Missy had stolen his ship too many times for him not to take precautions. Then he pocketed the sonic and began pacing, keeping an eye out for Susan's return. It was all he could do not to chase after her.

When they returned, walking side by side, the Doctor saw a new hint of serenity on his granddaughter's face. He looked at the two women with her, but their expressions were unreadable. "Susan!"

"Grandfather," said Susan. Beneath the serenity, her voice was sad. "It's all right. Don't look so worried. But it's time for us to say good bye."

"What did they say to you?" demanded the Doctor.

"Grandfather," said Susan, more severely. "You mustn't ask that. They aren't our enemies. But you can leave this universe. I can't."

"I know," said the Doctor bleakly.

Susan stepped forward, catching her grandfather in a sudden hug. "I'm glad. Glad that we met again after... after the war."

"Yes. So am I." He hugged her back stiffly. "And I'm sorry."
"I'm sorry, too," said Susan. Then, "Say it, Grandfather."

"Good bye, Susan." The Doctor finally spoke the words he had never had a chance to say during the Time War, words he had always hated, but had never even known to say when she had been erased from history.

"Good bye, Grandfather." Susan broke free and turned to Dagny, nodding. "Let's go."

Dagny nodded back. She gripped Susan's hand in her own. "Right. Here goes!"

An instant later, they were gone.
"A new start?" --- Susan (The Dalek Invasion of Earth)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"A new start? Rebuilding a planet from the very beginning. It's a wonderful idea." --- Susan (The Dalek Invasion of Earth)

For a long moment, the Doctor stared at the empty spot where his granddaughter had been. Nobody else spoke.

Finally, he turned to Bo. "Thank you. For helping Susan." He shifted awkwardly, then said, "I suppose it's time to say good bye to you, too."

"Yeah. Um. About that." Bo glanced over at the Rani. "We wanted to ask you..."

The Rani came over to stand with Bo. "You did offer, before. Just the one trip."

"Miasimia Goria?" asked the Doctor.

The Rani nodded. "My TARDIS should still be there. And it's had plenty of time to regenerate itself."

"Fine. Let's go, then." He gestured at the TARDIS. Soon only Persephone was left standing outside. She looked relieved by their departure, thought the Doctor, watching her on the scanner. Well, they were none of them welcome guests. He set the coordinates and sent the TARDIS back into her native universe.

The Rani found her TARDIS, fully functional again, in the wastelands of her ruined planet. She didn't use it to leave. Instead, as she informed the Doctor and Missy, she and Bo intended to stay and restore Miasimia Goria into a living world again.

"A lonely proposition," said the Doctor. Their scans had found nothing surviving anywhere in that solar system.

"It's what it is," said the Rani. "I have the equipment I need in the TARDIS. Whatever I don't have, I can find somewhere else and bring it back."

"What about some assistance?" asked the Doctor, an idea suddenly possessing him.

"Nice idea, totally impractical," said the Rani. "Where would I find qualified assistants willing to live here?"

"Ones with nowhere else to go," said the Doctor. Certainty seized him, that this was what he had done, what he would do. "Refugees from the Time War. Gallifreyan refugees, but their timelines are corrupt. The Time Lords would never permit them to return."

"Oh, them," said Missy. "Yeah, even Miasimia Goria would be an improvement over the void."

"What are you talking about?" asked Bo.

The Doctor explained.
"It's a start on the zero population problem," said the Rani at last. "Fine, if you think you can do it, bring them here."

"I'll bring the whole space station," said the Doctor.

"It's impossible, you know," said Missy. She stayed with the Doctor in his TARDIS while the Rani and Bo spectated from a safe distance of a few million kilometers away in their own ship. "You won't be able to find them in the void. No meaningful coordinates."

"I have already found them," he said. Then the world splintered apart, and the Doctor was no longer attached to reality.


"Calm down. Hush. You're safe. It's all right." Missy filled his head with soothing thoughts until he had to wake up properly just to shut her up.

The Doctor sat up with a groan. Everything ached. What had she been doing to him? Worse, what had he been doing to her? Better not to ask. He saw that he was on one of the beds in the TARDIS infirmary. "Zagreus again. But I'm free of the anti-time. It shouldn't have happened, it's not possible..."

"One of your escape attempts, back when we were on the space station in the void." Missy stood up and crossed the room. She checked one of the monitors, then turned back to him. "I had to give you enough freedom to jump out of the void. Only it turned out you came here first."

"You didn't say, before," said the Doctor, piecing the events together in his mind. He could almost remember, if he dared. The Stationmaster. He had used...

"I didn't know, before. I only lost you for a few seconds, but that was apparently enough for you."

The Doctor slid his hands over his eyes. A few seconds? "I killed the Stationmaster. Didn't I?"

"You used him to construct the bridge between the void and here. This point you anchored with the timelines of the refugees."

"Then they are here." Zagreus had latched onto him at the one point where the Doctor's thoughts would intersect his at the space station. His promise to help the refugees lurked in the back of his mind, and when the opportunity presented itself, that had been enough for Zagreus to form a connection across his own timeline. The Doctor dropped his hands and looked at Missy. "Are they all right?"

Missy shrugged. "As you might expect. Alive, though. Along with their space station, which is now and has always been in orbit around Miasimia Goria. The Rani and Bo went to talk to them."

The Doctor landed his TARDIS on the space station, staying just long enough to see that the refugees had indeed survived, their timelines now spliced into the history of Miasimia Goria. He saw them looking at him strangely, a little fearfully, but he did his best to ignore them.
Missy met with her daughter, handing her the music box. "It's yours, really. We just had to borrow it for a time. Use it in case you have any trouble with anti-time."

Bo nodded, accepting the box, even though her expression said clearly that she didn't trust the gift.

Missy smirked, unperturbed by Bo's distrust. "Well, we're off, then. Be seeing you!"

"God, I hope not," said the Rani, moving up next to Bo.

"Bye, Missy," said Bo stiffly.

"The Rani and my daughter," said Missy, shaking her head. She watched the Doctor set new coordinates. "It's a funny old universe, isn't it?"

The Doctor only grunted in response.

"Only it makes you think: if they can do it, we can do it. Right?" She moved behind him and nudged him playfully in the back.

The touch triggered one of the violent memories he couldn't consciously remember. With an inarticulate cry, he spun around and grabbed Missy by the front of her jacket and shoved her across the floor until the railing hit her back. "We. Can't." His eyes met hers, but he saw a different image, something that perhaps he hadn't wanted to remember. He had almost --- what had he done? "It's too dangerous."

"Is it? Everything we do is 'too dangerous'."

He stared blankly back at her.

"Stop gawping at me, idiot," said Missy, her patience running out. "If you're in someone's face like this, you have to either kiss them or threaten them. Make up your mind."

"One of us will end up dead. Or rewritten. Or half the universe will be gone. Zagreus... he... I..." The Doctor could almost see. It was there, just around the corner of his sanity. The scraps of memory he retained were enough to terrify him. "At any moment. I won't know. He could exist at any moment in time. Anywhere. We can't do this."

"Yes, we can." Missy grabbed his head and pulled him towards her until their foreheads met. He closed his eyes and let her thoughts run into his. There's no Zagreus. It's just you. You didn't kill me. And so what if you did? I've killed you before. It's all right, it's all right, it doesn't matter.

Madness. He knew it was, yet he couldn't bring himself to push her away. They were unstable, had always been unstable, together or apart. Their children were saner than they were. The thought sent him off on a tangent.

What? Missy sensed his sudden distraction.

Succubus. Your daughter is a succubus. Which means her mother must have been a succubus, yes?

Yes. Missy's amusement was clear. Oh, you wonder what it was like?

This time, he did turn away, feeling guilty for wondering, guilty for even wanting Missy at all, when he knew that she had killed Bo's mother. He let go of Missy, gripped the railing instead.

"Everyone dies, Doctor," said Missy, catching his thoughts. She used the Gallifreyan verb tense that
said it had already happened, that everyone was already dead. She put an arm around him and rested her head against his shoulder. His breath hitched at the contact, but he didn't move away. "Everyone, except us. We just go on and on and on, doing what we do. That's why."

She applied the same explanation to both of them, yet it was no explanation at all. No justification. Not in human terms. But then, they weren't human, either of them. The Doctor had spent so long among humans that he had almost adopted their sense of morality. Except when he didn't. And even on Gallifrey, they were considered outcasts, perverts, monsters. Perhaps Missy had a point. He found himself too tired to argue with her.

After awhile, Missy told him what it had been like, with a succubus, in slow, distant sentences that lulled him into a fragile peace with a cruel universe. More, she told him what Bo's mother's life had been. It was an unhappy tale, heavy with loss, betrayal, and cages. Even so, he found in the words a temporary easing of their loneliness.

The Doctor sat on a step in the console room, noodling away on his guitar. There was a song that kept running through his mind. Perhaps it had been stirred up by recent events. He didn't know. He stumbled through it at first, but now it came easily to his fingers. He played it over again.

"What is that song?" Missy came in and sat down next to him on the step.

The Doctor looked up, letting his hands silence the strings. "You've never heard it before?"

She shook her head.

"Then maybe he never existed," said the Doctor softly. "It was composed by a friend of mine. A musician." He picked out the first few notes of the tune. "Well, I say 'friend', but I lost him and I didn't even know it. At the end, he was ancient, and he hated me." He stopped, letting his right hand slide off to his side. "He had reason. Why are we so cruel to them?"

For once she had no answer for him.

"There were two of him. For a long time, I told myself that at least the second one was alive, had lived, would live. But I've been afraid to look." The Doctor looked down at the guitar. "So I play his song. They all leave in the end." He could name them, but the list was longer than he wanted to think about. Anyway, what was the use of a list? "Some of them I don't even allow myself to remember. Songs without a face. Stories when everything else is gone."

"But you remember the musician," said Missy. "Tell me about him?"

The Doctor glanced at her. Could he tell her? If he didn't, who else could he talk to? Who else would understand? The abyss lay between them, as dark and bottomless as ever, but now he thought that, perhaps, she wouldn't let him fall. No more than he could bear to let her fall. Maybe he would be Zagreus. Maybe she had another villainous scheme up her sleeve. But not today.

So.

He took a deep breath. Then, slowly, remembering as the words came to him, he began to speak. Telling the story to his oldest friend, the one that, despite everything, he had never truly lost.
There we have it: the "Zagreus"/"Hell-Bent" sequel, Time War angst, and "Lost Girl" crossover that no one in the world asked for. Because when they said "forever and ever" in "Zagreus", it annoyed me when it actually meant "until the end of this episode" (which was only about ten minutes away at that point). And because they didn't erase anyone we knew in "Neverland", plus "what did happen to Susan in the Time War anyway?" And because if we're going to have two immortal girlfriends roaming the universe in a TARDIS, it obviously had to be Lauren!Rani and Bo. Obviously!

For some reason, I thought it would be fun to write this story. Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! *wipes away tears of hysterical laughter* *fails sanity check and ponders writing another one*

My thanks to my kids for putting up with me all those times I "explained" the "plot" to them while they were trapped in the car with me and even giving me helpful feedback. Also thank you to everyone who read this bit of insanity. I appreciate any kudos, comments, reviews, etc. that you care to leave. Thanks!

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